魔法科高校の劣等生 8

The irregular at magic high school

追憶編

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Tsutomu Sato
illustration／石田可奈
Kana Ishida

電撃文庫

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illustrator assistant／シミー・ストーン、末永康子

design／BEE-PEE

兄がわたしのガーディアンになったのは、わたしが六歳の時。
わたしが当主になったならその影として、兄は一生を終えることになる。
わたしが、ガーディアンの任を解かない限りは。
兄がわたしについて来る。
あの人が後ろから追いかけて来る。
わたしはあの人から離れられない。
あの人はわたしから逃げられない。
逃がさないのはわたし。
逃げられないのはあの人。
わたしだけがあの人を普通の中学生に戻してあげられるのに。
——わたしは兄が苦手だ。
司波達也
しば・たつや
中学一年生。深雪の『ガーディアン』。実の母・深夜や妹の深雪に対しても、自身の感情をあまり表に出さず、何を考えているか、外部からは窺い知れない。深雪の護衛役として高度な武術訓練を受けており、その実力は大人の軍人すら凌駕するほど。
司波深雪
しば・みゆき
中学一年生。日本最強の魔法師集団『十師族』の一家「四葉」家次期当主候補。現在の当主は、叔母にあたる四葉真夜。その容姿は幼少から端麗で、近年はより増している。魔法の才能にも秀でていて、「冷却魔法」を得意とする。

桜井穂波
さくらい・ほなみ
深夜の『ガーディアン』。前職は警視庁のSPで、護衛業務のノウハウを学ぶ為に勤めていた。遺伝子操作により魔法資質を強化された調整体魔法師「桜」シリーズの第一世代。ガーディアンの護衛業務以外にも、深夜の身の回りの世話も担当している。
「今日のご予定はどうなさいますか？」
司波深夜
しば・みや
達也と深雪の母。血の繋がった息子である達也へ、恐ろしいほど冷淡に接する。現在は衰えているが精神干渉魔法の唯一の使い手。「忘却の川（レテ）の支配者（ミストレス）」の異名で畏怖されていた魔法師。
「こんな日にショッピングもちょっと、ねぇ……」

「彼らは深雪を手に掛けました。
その報いを受けさせなければなりません」
「お兄様……」

真田繁留
さなだ・しげる

防衛陸軍中尉。兵器開発部所属。自身で軍事用デバイスのカスタマイズを行うほど、『CAD』関連の高度な技術を持つ。

風間玄信
かざま・はるのぶ

防衛陸軍大尉。威厳のある風格と物腰の持ち主。沖縄県の恩納基地で空挺魔法師部隊の教官も兼務している。達也に一目置いている。

「司波達也君。君を、我々の戦列に加えよう」

2095年現在の世界情勢

世界の寒冷化を直接の契機とする第三次世界大戦、二〇年世界群発戦争により世界の地図は大きく塗り替えられた。現在の状況は以下のとおり。

USAはカナダ及びメキシコからパナマまでの諸国を併合して北アメリカ大陸合衆国（USNA）を形成。

ロシアはウクライナ、ベラルーシを再吸収して新ソビエト連邦（新ソ連）を形成。

中国はビルマ北部、ベトナム北部、ラオス北部、朝鮮半島を征服して大亜細亜連合（大亜連合）を形成。

インドとイランは中央アジア諸国（トルクメニスタン、ウズベキスタン、タジキスタン、アフガニスタン）及び南アジア諸国（パキスタン、ネパール、ブータン、バングラデシュ、スリランカ）を呑み込んでインド・ペルシア連邦を形成。

他のアジア・アラブ諸国は地域ごとに軍事同盟を締結し新ソ連、大亜連合、インド・ペルシアの三大国に対抗。

オーストラリアは事実上の鎖国を選択。

EUは統合に失敗し、ドイツとフランスを境に東西分裂。東西EUも統合国家の形成に至らず、結合は戦前よりむしろ弱体化している。

アフリカは諸国の半分が国家ごと消滅し、生き残った国家も辛うじて都市周辺の支配権を維持している状態となっている。

南アメリカはブラジルを除き地方政府レベルの小国分立状態に陥っている。

戦略級魔法師・十三使徒

現代魔法は高度な科学技術の中で育まれてきたものである為、軍事的に強力な魔法の開発が可能な国家は限られている。その結果、大規模破壊兵器に匹敵する戦略級魔法を開発できたのは一握りの国家だった。

ただ開発した魔法を同盟国に供与することは行われており、戦略級魔法に高い適性を示した同盟国の魔法師が戦略級魔法師として認められている例もある。

2095年4月段階で、国家により戦略級魔法に適性を認められ対外的に公表された魔法師は13名。彼らは十三使徒と呼ばれ、世界の軍事バランスの重要ファクターと見なされていた。十三使徒の所属国、氏名、戦略級魔法の名称は以下のとおり。

USNA
アンジー・シリウス：「ヘビィ・メタル・バースト」
エリオット・ミラー：「リヴァイアサン」
ローラン・バルト：「リヴァイアサン」
※この中でスターズに所属するのはアンジー・シリウスのみであり、エリオット・ミラーはアラスカ基地、ローラン・バルトは国外のジブラルタル基地から基本的に動くことはない。

新ソビエト連邦
イーゴリ・アンドレイビッチ・ベゾブラゾフ：「トゥマーン・ボンバ」
レオニード・コンドラチェンコ：「シムリャー・アールミヤ」
※コンドラチェンコは高齢の為、黒海基地から基本的に動くことはない。

大亜細亜連合
劉雲徳「霹靂塔」
※劉雲徳は2095年10月31日の対日戦闘で戦死している。

インド・ペルシア連邦
パラット・チャンドラ・カーン：「アグニ・ダウンバースト」

日本
五輪 澪：「深淵（アビス）」

ブラジル
ミゲル・ディアス：「シンクロライナー・フュージョン」
※魔法式はUSNAより供与されたもの。

イギリス
ウィリアム・マクロード：「オゾンサークル」

ドイツ
カーラ・シュミット：「オゾンサークル」
※オゾンサークルはオゾンホール対策として分裂前のEUで共同研究された魔法を原型としており、イギリスで完成した魔法式が協定により旧EU諸国に公開された。

トルコ
アリ・シャーヒーン：「バハムート」
※魔法式はUSNAと日本の共同で開発されたものであり、日本主導で供与された。

タイ
ソム・チャイ・ブンナーク：「アグニ・ダウンバースト」
※魔法式はインド・ペルシアより供与されたもの。

Character
キャラクター紹介

吉田幹比古
よしだ・みきひこ

1年E組。達也のクラスメイト。
古式魔法の名家。
エリカとは幼少時からの顔見知り。

司波達也
しば・たつや

1年E組。『雑草』と
揶揄される二科生(劣等生)。
全てに達観している。

光井ほのか
みつい・ほのか

1年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。
光波振動系魔法が得意。
思い込むとやや直情的。

司波深雪
しば・みゆき

1年A組。達也の妹。
主席入学した優等生。
冷却魔法が得意。兄を溺愛する。

北山 雫
きたやま・しずく

1年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。
振動・加速系魔法が得意。
感情の起伏をあまり表に出さない。

西城レオンハルト
さいじょう・れおんはると

1年E組。達也のクラスメイト。
硬化魔法が得意。明るい性格。

千葉エリカ
ちば・えりか

達也のクラスメイト。
剣術が得意。チャーミングな
トラブルメーカー。

柴田美月
しばた・みづき

1年E組。達也のクラスメイト。
霊子放射光過敏症。
少し天然が入った真面目な少女。

森崎 駿
もりさき・しゅん
1年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。
CAD早撃ちが得意。
一科生としての
プライドが高い。

明智英美
あけち・えいみ
1年B組。クォーターで、
フルネームはアメリア＝
英美＝明智＝ゴールディ。

七草真由美
さえぐさ・まゆみ
三年生。元生徒会会長。魔法科生徒の中でも
その能力は歴代最高クラス。

市原鈴音
いちはら・すずね
三年生。元・生徒会会計。
冷静沈着な頭脳派。
真由美の右腕。

渡辺摩利
わたなべ・まり
三年生。元風紀委員会委員長。
真由美の親友で、
物事全般にやや好戦的。

沢木 碧
さわき・みどり
二年生。風紀委員。
女性的な名前がコンプレックス。

里美スバル
さとみ・すばる
1年D組。美少年と
見まごう少女。
明るくノリの良い性格。

桜小路紅葉
さくらこうじ・あかは
1年B組。
スバル、エイミィの友達。
私服はゴスロリ風で、
テーマパーク好き。

中条あずさ
なかじょう・あずさ
二年生。真由美にかわって
生徒会会長となる。
オドオドした性格で
引っ込み思案。

服部刑部少丞範蔵
はっとり・ぎょうぶしょうじょう・はんぞう
二年生。元・生徒会副会長。
克人にかわり、部活連の
会頭となる。

辰巳鋼太郎
たつみ・こうたろう
三年生。元風紀委員。豪快な性格の持ち主。

関本 勲
せきもと・いさお
三年生。風紀委員会所属。
論文コンペ校内選考次点。

桐原武明
きりはら・たけあき
二年生。
剣術部所属。関東剣術大会
中等部のチャンピオン。

壬生紗耶香
みぶ・さやか
二年生。剣道部所属。
中等部剣道大会女子部の
全国二位。

平河小春
ひらかわ・こはる
三年生。九校戦ではエンジニアで参加。
論文コンペメンバーを辞退。

平河千秋
ひらかわ・ちあき
1年G組所属。達也に敵意を向ける。

安宿怜美
あすか・さとみ
保険医。おっとりホンワカした
笑顔が男子生徒に人気。

甘楽計夫
つづら・かずお
教師。専門は魔法幾何学。
論文コンペの世話役。

一条 茜
いちじょう・あかね
一条家の長女。
将輝の妹。
小学生だが、
ややマセている。

一条瑠璃
いちじょう・るり
一条家の次女。将輝の妹。
マイペースなしっかりもの。

五十里 啓
いそり・けい
二年生。生徒会会計。
魔法理論の成績は
学年トップ。千代田花音とは
許嫁同士。

千代田花音
ちよだ・かのん
二年生。摩利にかわり、
風紀委員長となる。
五十里啓とは許嫁同士。

十文字克人
じゅうもんじ・かつと
三年生。
元・部活連の会頭。

一条将輝
いちじょう・まさき
第三高校の一年生。
九校戦に出場。
十師族・一条家の次期当主。

吉祥寺真紅郎
きちじょうじ・しんくろう
第三高校の一年生。
九校戦に出場。
「カーディナル・ジョージ」の
異名で知られている。

一条美登里
いちじょう・みどり
将輝の母親。
温和な性格で
料理上手。

九重八雲
ここのえ・やくも
古式魔法「忍術」の使い手。
達也の体術の師匠。

千葉寿和
ちば・としかず
千葉エリカの長兄。警察省のキャリア組。
一見は遊び人風。

千葉修次
ちば・なおつぐ
千葉エリカの次兄。摩利の恋人。
千刃流剣術免許皆伝で
「千葉の麒麟児」の異名をとる。

牛山
うしやま
フォア・リーブス・テクノロジーCAD開発
第三課主任。達也が信頼を置く人物。

リン
森崎が助けた少女。
フルネームは
『孫美鈴(スンメイリン)』。
香港系国際犯罪シンジケート
「無頭竜」の新たなリーダー。

陳祥山
チェンシャンシェン
大亜連合軍特殊工作部隊隊長。
非情な性格の持ち主。

呂剛虎
リュウカンフゥ
大亜連合軍特殊工作部隊所属の
エース魔法師。
別名『人喰い虎』。

小野 遥
おの・はるか
1年E組の総合カウンセラー。
いじられ気質だが、裏の顔も持つ。

風間玄信
かざま・はるのぶ
陸軍101旅団・独立魔装大隊・隊長。
階級は少佐。

真田繁留
さなだ・しげる
陸軍101旅団・独立魔装大隊・幹部。
階級は大尉。

柳 連
やなぎ・むらじ
陸軍101旅団・独立魔装大隊・幹部。
階級は大尉。

山中幸典
やまなか・こうすけ
陸軍101旅団・独立魔装大隊・幹部。
軍医少佐。一級の治癒魔法師。

藤林響子
ふじばやし・きょうこ
風間の副官を務める女性士官。
階級は少尉。

九島 烈
くどう・れつ
世界最強の魔法師の一人と
目されていた人物。
敬意を以て「老師」と呼ばれる。

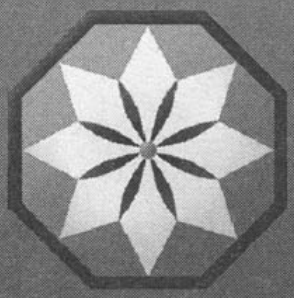
司波小百合
しば・さゆり
達也と深雪の義母。二人を嫌悪している。

周
チョウ
呂と陳を日本に手引きした
美貌の青年。

Glossary
用語解説

魔法科高校
国立魔法大学付属高校の通称。全国に九校設置されている。
この内、第一から第三までが一学年定員二百名で
一科・二科制度を採っている。

ブルーム、ウィード
第一高校における一科生、二科生の格差を表す隠語。
一科生の制服の左胸には八枚花弁のエンブレムが
刺繍されているが、二科生の制服にはこれが無い。

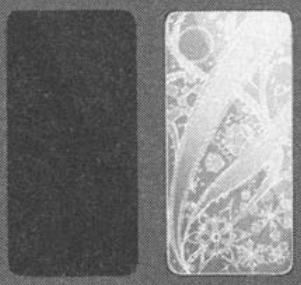


一科生のエンブレム

CAD〔シー・エー・ディー〕
魔法発動を簡略化させるデバイス。
内部には魔法のプログラムが記録されている。
特化型、汎用型などタイプ・形状は様々。

フォア・リーブス・テクノロジー〔FLT〕
国内CADメーカーの一つ。
元々完成品よりも魔法工学部品で有名だったが、
シルバー・モデルの開発により
一躍CADメーカーとしての知名度が増した。

司波達也のCAD



司波深雪のCAD

トーラス・シルバー
僅か一年の間に特化型CADのソフトウェアを
十年は進歩させたと称えられる天才技術者。

エイドス〔個別情報体〕
元々はギリシア哲学用語。現代魔法学において
エイドスとは、事象に付随する情報体のことで、
「世界」にその「事象」が存在することの記録で、
「事象」が「世界」に記す足跡とも言える。
現代魔法学における「魔法」の定義は、エイドスを改変することによって、
その本体である「事象」を改変する技術とされている。

イデア〔情報体次元〕
元々はギリシア哲学用語。現代魔法学においてイデアとは、エイドスが記録されるプラットフォームのこと。
魔法の一次的形態は、このイデアというプラットフォームに魔法式を出力して、
そこに記録されているエイドスを書き換える技術である。

起動式
魔法の設計図であり、魔法を構築するためのプログラム。
CADには起動式のデータが圧縮保存されており、
魔法師から流し込まれたサイオン波を展開したデータに従って信号化し、魔法師に返す。

サイオン（想子）
心霊現象の次元に属する非物質粒子で、認識や思考結果を記録する情報素子のこと。
現代魔法の理論的基盤であるエイドス、現代魔法の根幹を支える技術である起動式や魔法式は
サイオンで構築された情報体である。

プシオン（霊子）
心霊現象の次元に属する非物質粒子で、その存在は確認されているがその正体、その機能については
未だ解明されていない。一般的な魔法師は、活性化したプシオンを「感じる」ことができるにとどまる。

魔法師
『魔法技能師』の略語。魔法技能師とは、実用レベルで魔法を行使するスキルを持つ者の総称。

魔法式
事象に付随する情報を一時的に改変する為の情報体。魔法師が保有するサイオンで構築されている。

魔法演算領域
魔法式を構築する精神領域。魔法という才能の、いわば本体。魔法師の無意識領域に存在し、魔法師は通常、魔法演算領域を意識して使うことは出来ても、そこで行われている処理のプロセスを意識することは出来ない。魔法演算領域は、魔法師自身にとってもブラックボックスと言える。

魔法式の出力プロセス
❶起動式をCADから受信する。これを「起動式の読込」という。
❷起動式に変数を追加して魔法演算領域に送る。
❸起動式と変数から魔法式を構築する。
❹構築した魔法式を、無意識領域の最上層にして意識領域の最下層たる「ルート」に転送、意識と無意識の狭間に存在する「ゲート」から、イデアへ出力する。
❺イデアに出力された魔法式は、指定された座標のエイドスに干渉しこれを書き換える。

単一系統・単一工程の魔法で、この五段階のプロセスを半秒以内で完了させることが、「実用レベル」の魔法師としての目安になる。

魔法の評価基準（魔法力）
サイオン情報体を構築する速さが魔法の処理能力であり、構築できる情報体の規模が魔法のキャパシティであり、魔法式がエイドスを書き換える強さが干渉力、この三つを総合して魔法力と呼ばれる。

基本コード仮説
「加速」「加重」「移動」「振動」「収束」「発散」「吸収」「放出」の四系統八種にそれぞれ対応したプラスとマイナス、合計十六種類の基本となる魔法式が存在していて、この十六種類を組み合わせることで全ての系統魔法を構築することができるという理論。

系統魔法
四系統八種に属する魔法のこと。

系統外魔法
物質的な現象ではなく精神的な現象を操作する魔法の総称。
心霊存在を使役する神霊魔法・精霊魔法から読心、幽体分離、意識操作まで多種にわたる。

十師族
日本で最強の魔法師集団。一条(いちじょう)、一之倉(いちのくら)、一色(いっしき)、二木(ふたつぎ)、二階堂(にかいどう)、二瓶(にへい)、三矢(みつや)、三日月(みかづき)、四葉(よつば)、五輪(いつわ)、五頭(ごとう)、五味(いつみ)、六塚(むつづか)、六角(ろっかく)、六郷(ろくごう)、六本木(ろっぽんぎ)、七草(さえぐさ)、七宝(しっぽう)、七夕(たなばた)、七瀬(ななせ)、八代(やつしろ)、八朔(はっさく)、八幡(はちまん)、九島(くどう)、九鬼(くき)、九頭見(くずみ)、十文字(じゅうもんじ)、十山(とおやま)の二十八の家系から四年に一度の「十師族選定会議」で選ばれた十の家系が『十師族』を名乗る。

数字付き
十師族の苗字に一から十までの数字が入っているように、百家の中でも本流とされている家系の苗字には"『千』代田"、"『五十』里"、"『千』葉"家の様に、十一以上の数字が入っている。
数値の大小が力の強弱を表すものではないが、苗字に数字が入っているかどうかは、血筋が大きく物を言う、魔法師の力量を推測する一つの目安となる。

数字落ち
エクストラ・ナンバーズ、略して「エクストラ」とも呼ばれる、「数字」を剥奪された魔法師の一族。
かつて、魔法師が兵器であり実験体サンプルであった頃、「成功例」としてナンバーを与えられた魔法師が、「成功例」に相応しい成果を上げられなかった為に捺された烙印。

Chapter 1

November 6th, AD 2095 / Yotsuba Main House - Reception Room

A rather large building done in the style of a traditional samurai residence.

That is the impression of the Yotsuba Main House as seen from outside the gate.

Compared to a typical residence it is certainly spacious. Even calling it a mansion would not be a misnomer.

However, someone who had seen the grand mansions of those like the Saegusa Family and Ichijou Family would probably be rather surprised by its simple snug appearance.

The Yotsuba do not care about the spaciousness of their house. Because the Yotsuba Family, who maintain a systematic policy of secrecy, would never invite a large number of outsiders as guests. Perhaps they think a grand mansion would only be an encumbrance.

Without regard to the fact that her mother's home, Miyuki mused over the matter from an outsider's perspective, as she and her brother stepped through the massively built gate together.

It had been one week since that day — the day that would come to be known in the future as 'The Scorched Halloween'.

The siblings had brought themselves to a mountain village not recorded on any map by foot, in accordance to their aunt's invitation — which should rather be called a summons to appear before her.

Despite what might be imagined from its outward appearance, they were ushered into a modern and quite expansive reception room where they were informed to wait. This was not a small reception room used for privacy; it was a large room that could be classified as an 'Audience Chamber' which let them know that today's summons was not a personal one from their aunt, but from the Master of Yotsuba Family.

—Well, we had discerned that from the beginning, thought Miyuki, nevertheless.

This would make it three years since she had last been summoned to this room together with her brother.

Although Miyuki was present and accounted for, her aunt, who until now for one pretext or another did not try meeting her brother except in occasions when the entire family gathered together for celebrations or congratulations, had after three years met him face to face.

Of course, Miyuki could not determine whether that was a good thing or a bad thing.

"—Don't worry. We are not the same as three years ago."

Her uneasiness had apparently shown on her face. Miyuki tilted her eyes upward to find Tatsuya nodding reassuringly in her line of sight as she peeked at him.

Next to the sofa Miyuki was sitting on, he remained standing.

Three years ago, he also took the same posture.

Three years ago, he stood behind Miyuki.

Yes....things were different from three years ago.

Tatsuya was probably talking about how their abilities had changed from three years ago. Unquestionably, the two of them had gotten stronger that they could not be compared to three years ago. Especially in regards to Tatsuya, he had attained combat power that rivaled that of their aunt, Yotsuba Maya, famed as one of the world's strongest magicians, known as "The Maou of the Far East" and "The Queen of Night". If you examine their magic affinities in detail, it would be readily apparent that in a one on one confrontation Tatsuya would win.

However, more than their power relationship with their aunt, there were things that changed from three years past, Miyuki thought.

—That was the relationship between her brother and herself.

—Her own heart, and the feelings it directed towards her brother.

The mind of Miyuki who was sitting on the sofa with a perfectly corrected posture drifted to that time three years ago...

Chapter 2

August 4th, AD 2092 / Okinawa - Naha Airport ~ Onna Serika Vacation home

—Beginning from around Common Era 2030, the earth underwent a radical drop in temperature; the world's overall food supply deteriorated on a massive scale. Since around 2020, advanced agriculture production came to be a solar-powered industry and this limited the influence it had on advanced industrial nations. However, the impact of the damage on the emerging industrial nations that had experienced an accelerated population explosion brought on by radical economic growth was a profound one.

With the drop in temperature and desertification proceeding simultaneously in the North China region, it was confronted with an extremely serious situation.

The residents of North China, in accordance with the traditions of their people, weathered such dire straits. Colonization by Border Transgression — in short, by using illegal immigration.

However, Russia did not assent to the influx of illegal immigrants. This resulted in illegal aliens being thoroughly expunged, even from unpopulated wildernesses and rented out nooks of houses.

Those who possess true power, cannot grow weary of bloodshed.

China admonished Russia in the name of humanitarianism; Russia admonished China in the name of international law.

The antagonism of both nations was not confined between them.

Crossing national borders in the name of humanitarianism is banned by international law.

Throughout the world, kindling was laid just waiting for a match.

In this environment, there was a food shortage caused by temperature dropping.

There was a struggle over energy resources to be used to alleviate the problem.

For the kindling to become an inferno, even a slight impetus would have been enough.

In Common Era 2045, World War Three — an outbreak of 20 years of wars clustered across the world started.

From 2045 to 2064, wide scale border disputes throughout the world made this an era of continuous war.

Not a single nation was able to remain a bystander; this was truly a world war.

When the conflicts finally ceased, the world's population was a third of the size it had been in 2045; it had been decreased to 3 billion people.

Russia reabsorbed Ukraine and Belarus into the New Soviet Union (ShinSoRen); China governed over the northern parts of Burma, Vietnam, and Laos as well as the Korean peninsula through the Great Asia Alliance (Asian Alliance); India and Iran devoured various countries in central Asia to construct the Indo-Persia Union; the USA absorbed Canada and Mexico to fuse all of North America into one nation (USNA); the EU split into eastern and western parts; half of the various countries of Africa dissolved; in South America, aside from Brazil, the region was divided into small countries where governments did not have much reach beyond their own location.

The world had been transformed this way by 20 years of warfare, even though it never resorted to nuclear warfare, and magicians were one part of this world and its transformation.

In 2046, "The International Magic Federation" was established.

Their purpose was to prevent the pollution of the earth beyond what it could recover from through the use of radioactive materials in weapons of mass destruction.

Within the bounds of their stated purpose to halt the use of nuclear weapons, magicians freed themselves from the yokes of the countries they belonged to and were permitted to intervene with their skills in border disputes. Even magicians on the front lines taking part by killing each other would cease their skirmish when they observed signs of the use of nuclear weapons; whether it was their own country or their enemy's country, they would cooperate to stop the deployment of nuclear weapons.

The banning of nuclear weapons has been established as the paramount duty of magicians around the world.

This pact, "The International Magic Federation's Charter", targets radioactive materials that can be used for weapons that contaminate the environment. Strictly speaking, that does not include clean nuclear bombs. However, since in order to detonate a state of the art nuclear bomb made to be use for great battles, a small nuclear bomb was indispensable, this resulted in a complete ban on nuclear weapons.

Thus, in the period of war that lasted twenty years, there was not a single usage of nuclear weapons.

The International Magic Federation was honored for this achievement. Internationally recognized as an agency of peace even after the world war ended, it occupies a position of prestige—

I heard the announcement that it was time to put on my seat belt and closed the file of teaching material in "Contemporary History - A Guide" that related to magicians. The contents were a little difficult for someone like me who had just become a middle school student, but it was sufficient to keep me from being bored.

I had heard that modern airplanes were not subject to failure caused by electromagnetic interference generated by information terminals. However, turning information terminals off during takeoffs and landings was a traditional courtesy. Not only me, the other passengers also turned their terminals off. I did not intend to be the only one disobeying the rules of common sense like a spoiled child.

The seat was covered by an egg shaped safety shield, a real-time image of a southern island was projected on the interior.

Looking at that vivid greenery and sparkling ocean, makes the world's temperature drop seem like an event in a fictional story.

Nevertheless, that event is an unequivocal fact.

Before we were born, the world's climate began getting warmer but, we can look at the traces of the temperature dropping all around us.

For example, the dress code.

Not exposing bare skin, this manner in which we dress is nothing but a trace of the deep impression the era of the temperature dropping left on the world.

Well, I have no interest in dressing to expose my shoulders or breast area — and in the first place, it would not be a flattering style on me, yet—, it's not compulsory to have a skirt so long the hem drags, and I like clothes. However in private places, there are no rules over the manner of dressing so it's not like it really hinders us.

While I am thinking of these trivial things, the airplane touched down at Naha airport.

I could hardly feel any tremors from the landing.

The seat belt that was only a meaningless formality unlocked and I opened the shield of the capsule seat.

Underneath was a regular seat, the seat was so narrow my elbow collided with it, it seemed like we were crammed in here without a trace of civility but, if I had to put up with who knows how many people I don't know and had never seen before at point blank range for an hour, I wouldn't be able to endure it.

I waited for Okaa-sama to leave her seat. Together we turned to the passenger exit.

We were using the summer break for a private family vacation trip.

A family trip was originally a private matter, I think, but in the case of our family trips, they were almost never private. Even so I was regrettably cheerful.

The only cloud on the horizon was that it was not just Okaa-sama and I, Ani[1] would also be with us.

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When we left the VIP lounge in the arrival lobby, Ani had already gone and picked up our checked in luggage and was waiting for us.

Having Ani travel all by himself and get the luggage wasn't some form of petty meanness.

Executive Class passengers had precedence when it came to disembarking from the plane. Their luggage also had precedence in being returned, nay, as expected he did have to wait a little. Considering the time it took to get the luggage ready for pick up, having Ani, who was a commercial class passenger, go and pick up the luggage for us is not pointless.

Naturally, there is a proper reason for Ani to be seated in commercial class alone.

In Executive Class, in addition to the normal cabin attendant, special crew members who specialize in handling violence act as guards and keep a watchful eye. If a criminal incident like a hijacking, suicide bomber or such were to occur, it would be in the loosely guarded commercial class. Ani is assigned a commercial class seat, for the sake of handling such an unlikely occurrence. That being said — even I acknowledge that the way my family handles such matters is not normal.

While I walk with Okaa-sama, I happen to glance over my shoulder. Ani is pushing the cart carrying our luggage all alone as if it were perfectly normal without a trace of dissatisfaction on his face, silently trailing us.

Like he always does.

I do not particularly hate this Ani.

I merely have trouble interacting with him.

I have no idea what he could possibly be thinking.

Why, is he commonly treated like a servant when he is family? If he were a servant, it would probably be normal to be calm at receiving this treatment.

I know I have been told that this is the duty he has been assigned to do.

I also acknowledge our family's uniqueness.

Nevertheless, Ani is only a first year middle school student like me.

Ani was born in April and I was born in March.

We were born within a year of each other, so we are in the same school year. This is only a coincidence brought about by our birth months. However, all the same, this does not change the fact that until March of this year he was an elementary school student like me.

Considering that fact, how can he take to being ordered about by me, his younger sister so calmly—

The eyes of Ani and I met.

My several glances over my shoulder are probably bothering him.

"...What is it?"

I recognize that the reason Ani also directed his eyes towards me is because I have been looking at him intermittently.

However, from my mouth only a repulsive voice came out.

"It is nothing."

Ani responded in a polite tone like one a butler might use to address the mistress of the house he was serving.

Like or dislike, the love of a brother for his sister or the hatred of close kin; all those emotions a brother might direct to a younger sister or a close relative were not there.

"If that is so, please do not stare at me. It is uncomfortable!"

I acknowledge that I am being unreasonable.

We are the ones who are treating Ani as a servant, there is no reason for Ani to wish such a thing.

Despite that, I selfishly strike at Ani with my irritation.

"Pardon me."

Ani halted and bowed his head towards me.

And put a little more distance between us than there had been until then as he followed behind us.

Why, I thought.

Just now I was merely being self-centered. I am such a disagreeable child.

—Just like I thought, I have trouble interacting with this Ani.

◊ ◊ ◊

The place we are staying in this time is a recently purchased vacation home in Onna Serika. I would have been fine with a hotel, but since Okaa-sama does not handle places with numerous people well, Chichi[2] hurriedly prepared this for us.

As usual that man appears to think that he can use money to buy affection. ...Even though that money is what he married Okaa-sama to obtain.

Although Chichi was extraordinary when he was young — since even for a magician, he posses an above normal quantity of psions, his potential power made him highly prized as a magician. It seems however, according to the current magic technical system the quantity of psions possessed does not influence the superiority or inferiority of magic ability. In the end,

that man could not make his potential power into actual power; he renounced trying to make his life a success as a magician. Currently he is installed as an executive in a company created by Okaa-sama's family.

Because of those particulars, I can understand why he is deferential to Okaa-sama. Yet, as his daughter, I wish he would display a more father-like uprightness.

...I lightly shook my head to chase away these pointless reflections from inside my mind. After all I am on vacation, I am aware that being trapped in unpleasant thoughts is foolish.

"Welcome, Oku-sama. It is good that you have come, also Miyuki-san, Tatsuya-kun."

The one who came out to greet us at the vacation house was Sakurai Honami, who had been sent slightly ahead of us in order to take care of the cleaning, shopping, and other such things for us.

She is Okaa-sama's Guardian.

Until five years ago, Sakurai-san was a SP of the Metropolitan Police Department. I believe that they quite strongly attempted to impede her departure when she resigned. However, it had been decided that she would be Okaa-sama's Guardian before she sought employment with the Metropolitan Police Department. Joining the Metropolitan Police Department was for the purpose of learning the ins and outs of guard operations.

She is a modified magician whose genetic structure has been altered to strengthen her disposition for magic, a member of the first generation of the 'Sakura' Series. During the waning days of the 20 years of continuous border conflicts, she was constructed at a research institute, a magician bought by the Yotsuba Family before she was born.

Nonetheless, she is a cheerful, lively woman who does not seem to feel the weight of her personal history. Aside from her main duty of protection operations, she takes care of Okaa-sama's everyday necessities with great attention to detail for us. According to her, she finds the role of housekeeper the more congenial role.

It ran counter to the image of a Guardian to abandon her protection operations, but she came ahead of us to the vacation house in order to

gather knowledge about the current status of this area, since Ani would be close to Okaa-sama and me. That being said, I wished Sakurai-san and Ani had switched duties. —But, since taking care of the details of providing a comfortable household would be impossible for Ani, that would be pointless.

"Now, please come in. There is chilled barley tea ready. Or else, I can also make some green tea if you would like me to?"

"Thank you. Since it has already been made, I'll have the barley tea."

"Yes, ma'am. Miyuki-san, Tatsuya-kun, is barley tea alright for you as well?"

"Yes, thank you very much."

"Since you have troubled yourself to make it."

There is only one thing about Sakurai-san that might be called unsatisfactory, it is that she treats Ani as Okaa-sama's son — and as my brother.

It goes without saying that this is a natural thing to do.

However, I am...unable to do that natural thing.

At times like this, I am irrationally vexed with myself for that reason.

"Okaa-sama, I would like to take a short walk."

I am aware that since we have just arrived, things are too unsettled for me to go for a swim. But on the other hand, being shut up in the vacation house would be wasteful, so I would like to take a walk. Walking to Manzamou would be impossible because it is a little too far, but just walking leisurely along the path alongside the beach would undoubtedly feel pleasant.

"Miyuki-san, have Tatsuya accompany you on your walk."

Unfortunately, when I heard Okaa-sama's reply, I felt that my long awaited walk was spoiled from the start.

I really wished to proclaim that I would be alright alone, however I did not want to worry her too much.

"—I understand."

It took all my strength to keep my voice from being petulant.

I pulled my wide brimmed straw hat low, did not look behind, and walked out beneath the waning rays of the sun.

The ocean breeze fluttering the hem of my summer dress is as relaxing as I thought it would be.

I received help from Sakurai-san in order to apply sun block from head to toe without missing a spot, so I could feel the wind on my arms and legs without concern for the sun's rays.

With my skin covered in brown cream, I think that I don't look much different when compared to a local child.

Probably, thanks to that I am not stared at when I pass by someone, this is a comfortable feeling.

My skin has never known the feeling of tanning in the sun, it is not conceited to say that I am regrettably conspicuous in places like a beach.

—Nay, I am really not conceited about it.

I have a memory of going to a pool with my elementary school friends and being deeply horrified by being told that I looked like a "Yuki-Onna[3]", even now, I cannot blot it out. The remark was excessively horrifying because it was a thoughtless remark, not by any means an attempt to bully me or to maliciously talk behind my back or anything like that.

There is no way I am lacking in my pigmentation. It's just that my hair is a shade of black too deep.

Could it be hereditary? But, my family line is not supposed to be intermingled with Europeans for the past five generations...well, since I do not know any farther than that; the possibility that this comes from some long ago genetic ancestor is not nonexistent. However, even Okaa-sama becomes a little darker in the summer and Ani's complexion could be called tanned, since it so splendidly soaks up the sun so much that I can no longer tell what his original color is, so I do not believe it could be called a hereditary thing.

"____"

I have been remembering and contemplating things that I do not wish to, I consciously focused ahead in order to not look back, too consciously. ...What should I do with my mind, I am so perplexed.

Although my ears are unobstructed, I can not hear the sound of footsteps. There is no sign of someone being there. —Naturally, I have no skill at detecting someone's presence to begin with, but still.

If I turned around, however, undeniably at a little distance away, Ani is accompanying me.

Because Ani is my Guardian.

Why do I not use "bodyguard" but a grandiose term like "Guardian", I do not understand. Not even a single reason why, even now. However, a "Guardian" of Yotsuba is somehow different from a simple "bodyguard", that is something I think I am able to understand.

A bodyguard does a "job", a guardian performs a "duty".

Bodyguards risk their lives to protect the ones they are guarding in exchange for earning a monetary reward. There are cases like an SP of the police who conduct protection operations as part of their professional duties, but since those people also receive a salary for their professional duties, I think that they unmistakably meet the broad definition of occupations that receive monetary compensation.

In contrast to that, Guardians receive no monetary rewards. All the necessities of living are provided by Yotsuba. Whenever cash is needed, Yotsuba supplies it. To be correct that is not a reward, it is the cost of maintaining the power of protection.

I conclude that it is thus, a bodyguard protects in order to eat; a Guardian eats in order to protect.

Guardians have no private life of their own. All of them, the male Guardians and the female Guardians, are devoted to serve and protect the person they call Master or Mistress.

We are a clan that thinks that this is perfectly normal and I too, find it so. If you cannot think that this is normal, the only thing you can do is withdraw. However, we are 'Yotsuba'. —Even if I am somewhat embarrassed to be called Mistress, I feel that that is preferable to being expelled, but still. I am

happy when we are away from the clan; "Guardians" do not normally use the designations of "Master" or "Mistress" when we are not inside the clan.

Ani became my Guardian when I was six years old. My first Guardian is Ani, this is probably something that will not be changed for a long time.

That person is not the son of the elder sister of the head of the Yotsuba Clan, he is the Guardian of a candidate to be the next head. If I become the head, he will be my shadow. Until my life ends, it will be that way.

As long as I do not relieve him of his duty as a Guardian.

Yes, that is the single way a Guardian can escape his duty and be allowed to live the life of a normal person - for a Guardian to be dismissed by the one he guards.

He accompanies me.

He follows behind me.

I cannot be separated from him.

He cannot escape from me.

The one who will not escape is me.

The one who is unable to escape is him.

Despite the fact that I am the only person that can let him return to the life of an ordinary middle school student.

The one who keeps Ani from being able to be an ordinary middle school student is me. Because I will not release Ani.

—I do not know how to interact with Ani.

—I do not hate Ani.

Then why am I confining him to this cruel condition?

The answer does not come.

Whenever I think about this matter, for some reason my mind goes blank.

With my gaze fixated on the ground beneath my feet, I quickened my pace.

I had my eyes cast downward and my feet going at a fast walk. Suddenly, my arm was grabbed and it seemed like I was going to fall backward.

Immediately, before I impacted with what would be a thud, I deplorably fell into Ani's arms.

I made no complaint to Ani.

What happened just now is my fault, who was not looking ahead. —The fact that I reflexively raised my voice is a secret; I have no intention of telling anyone.

The problem is that after my body was restrained by Ani, I received an impact from the front. I was not the one who bumped into someone, clearly I had been the one bumped.

Even though I am angry, this is obviously a set up.

I focus my anger filled gaze upward. However, all I could see is a bulky wall of muscles.

I set my gaze even higher.

Finally, I knew the identity of the one who bumped into me.

A big black male teenager[4], who wore a disheveled worn out army uniform — a 'Left Blood'.

Due to the intensification of the twenty years of continuous border conflicts, the American (at the time it was still the USA) forces garrisoned in Okinawa eventually withdrew to Hawaii and left behind their children. The majority of them were not abandoned by their parents, but rather because their fathers had died in the war. However, many of them were taken in and raised by the National Defense force who had inherited the base, afterwards they became part of the military.

They are valiant soldiers who superbly fulfill the duty of defending the border, and many of their children also become soldiers. However, a private Okinawa Tourist Guide website contained an article warning that many of those children, in short the second generation, were known for behaving badly so one should be wary of them.

Behind the large youth, there were two teenagers also wearing old tattered army uniforms in a sloppy manner with similar builds, releasing sneering laughter in a nauseating fashion.

My reflexive anger was naturally changed into fear.

My mind was so crammed with fear that the natural thought that if the worst happens, I can use magic, could not be formed.

—Until my field of vision was blocked by Ani's back.

It was the lean back of a young boy.

Nevertheless, it was a broader back than mine.

I did not notice when it started, but I was being sheltered by Ani's back.

"Hey, I got no business with a brat like you?"

Disdaining us with scorn, the big youth peered at Ani's face.

Ani made no response.

"You're too scared to speak?"

"Ha ha, a chicken boy. Only trying to show off!"

The two youths behind him deride and threaten Ani.

The anger in my heart is rejuvenated.

Compared to before, their plan is more obvious.

'Should have taken my CAD with me', I lamented. I can't control the effects of my power very well when I lack an assisting tool. Causing serious injuries even to someone like this would be awkward in various ways.

If I had access to a CAD, these jerks would not be saying whatever they like!

Not even I myself understood why on earth I was burning with such rage. I glared at the big teenager barring the path in front of Ani.

The big teen's eyes looked at me and narrowed.

His lips moved.

It could have been to laugh, it could have been to speak. There is no way to tell.

"Since we have no intention of begging you to mercifully forgive us for bumping into you, turn away from this course of action. For both of our sakes."

The calm tone was not that of someone who could be called a boy, the big teen's face stiffened due to the completely unchild-like statement.

"—What did you say?"

It was a low faint whisper-like query.

"You should have been able to hear?"

The retort completely lacked emotion as if it was a mere comment made to oneself.

In both of the teen's eyes, an evil glint nested.

"Even if you press your head to the ground, I won't forgive you. For now, I'll let you off with bruises."

"If you are talking about Dogeza[5], you shouldn't say head, you have to say forehead."

Immediately, afterwards.

With no sign or previous indication, the teen struck out at Ani.

Even though Ani was a teenager as well, Ani still had the body of a first year middle school student. The difference between him and the big youth before my eyes was that of an adult and a child.

I reflexively closed my eyes.

There was a thud like sound.

I just realized that if Ani was struck, then I, who was behind him, would become involved as well. I thought it was strange that that had not occurred.

Timidly, I open my eyes.

The first sight that entered my vision was the face of the big teen frozen in disbelief.

There was no need to worry about what could cause him to make such a look.

The teen's right arm was extended in an incomplete punch.

Ani was stopping the fist with two hands.

Although it was two arms versus one arm, the difference between the weight of their two bodies was such that it should not have made any difference.

The mass of the big teen's body was probably over two times that of Ani.

Despite that fact, Ani was not warding off the blow. Without taking even one step back to brace himself, Ani was taking the full weight the big teen was putting into that punch head on and stopping it.

Did he use magic? —No, there was no indication of that.

In things like academics, physical strength, and agility, Ani was more capable. But in magic, I am supposed to be more capable than Ani. If Ani used magic then there is no way I would be unaware of it.

"Interesting...I only intended to play around with you but...."

Grinning broadly, the big teen pulled back his arm and assumed a posture with his left fist in front of his chest.

Boxing?

Karate?

I, a complete novice in combat and martial arts was unable to recognize which it is. However, somehow even I could discern that the foe who had been half playing before had become serious.

I forgot about fleeing, from the shadow behind that boy's back I peeped at the big teenager.

That boy's lackadaisical comment plunged into my ears, who said nothing and stilled my breath.

"Are you sure? It's going to be no laughing matter if we go beyond this point."

Why are you speaking in such a provocative manner?!

Typically if someone like you took him on, you would not be able to match him.

Typically, people of our age should flee in this situation.

No, Ani's intentions do not matter.

I should flee even if I have to do it alone.

—Despite what I was thinking in my head, my body did not leave its place behind Ani's back.

"You're spouting a lot of trash talk for a brat!"

What happened next could not be caught with my eyes.

I could only understand the results, everything else is mere conjecture about what occurred.

The teen's left leg advanced forward.

The teen's left leg and right leg were placed in what looked like a fighting stance, Ani placed his left leg forward.

The teen's left hand was aiming for Ani's collar, just as the lunging fist seemed about to connect.

Ani's left fist was propping him up from its position on the middle of his chest.

In that short blur of time, more than this seemed to have occurred but some time was unmistakably used by the big teen to spring back using the recoil.

Do-on, a sound like that of a Taiko[6] being struck, surely that was the sound of Ani's fist.

Ani withdrew the leg he had placed forward, and as if it were a prearranged signal, the big teen's body sank; cries of pain arose from where he was down on both knees on the surface of the road.

Ani looked past the big teenager who was crouching down and coughing painfully, and quietly directed his eyes to the people behind him.

Like they were petrified, the two male teens did not move.

Ani turned his back on them.

"Let's go."

Ani took my arm in his hand.

At last, I became aware that those softly murmured words were directed towards me.

"Miyuki-san, did something happen?"

When I returned from my aborted walk, Sakurai-san paled and rushed over to me in a small sprint.

I did not think my face looked that terrible, but even I myself realized that I had turned a little pale. So, from the outset, I made no attempt to deceive her.

"It was a minor....unfortunate encounter with a young man."

"Well....!"

With only that Sakurai-san seemed to have discerned the gist of the situation.

Nonchalantly, she made a survey of my person, probably checking to see if my clothes were in disarray.

"I am fine."

It was a bit of a strain but, I think my smile was natural.

When I directed my smile to her, Sakurai-san also returned a relieved smile to me.

However, I could not continue smiling for long.

Because Ani saved me — that phrase did not depart from my mouth.

I shifted my focus from the words I thought to say, Ani was feigning ignorance; his face was, as always, expressionless. He bowed lightly to Sakurai-san. Despite that, his eyes never turned toward me and withdrew to an inner room.

Regrettably, the painfully constructed smile I had made seems to be about to crumble.

"—Taking a shower will rinse off the sweat."

There was no sweat on me, but I used that as a pretext to take refuge in the shower room.

The hot water of the shower bounced off my skin.

I forgot to remove the water repellent cream, so I merely felt the heat. This allowed my body that seemed about to shake to warm.

"Why..."

I took my head out from under the spray of the shower. Hot drops outline my face, by the corner of my eyes and above my cheekbones, different kinds of drops intermingle.

"Why am I crying...?"

A bemused voice reached my own ears. It was not a tearful voice, it was as if it was somebody else's voice.

"Why do I have to cry?"

Panicking, I even try shouting. There is no answer. I am the only one here.

"why...Why..."

The only sound that I can hear is the sound of the shower. No one will give me an answer to my question.

Chapter 3

November 6th, AD 2095 / Yotsuba Main House - Drawing room

"Oh my."

Upon hearing Tatsuya's utterance as he looked out the window facing the courtyard, Miyuki's consciousness returned from the past to the present.

"Onii-sama?"

"It's the Kuroba elder sister and younger brother."

Glancing up at his sister's question, Tatsuya answered with a slight look of surprise.

"Ayako-san and Fumiya-kun?"

Although his flicker of surprise was faint, it didn't escape Miyuki's notice. Having risen halfway, she hurriedly tried to correct her posture, before thinking better of it and sitting back down with a flop.

"It seems they just came out."

The complex the Kuroba siblings were coming from was the place their grandmother, the little sister of Tatsuya and Miyuki's deceased grandfather, as well as aunt to the current head Maya lived.

Kuroba Fumiya is the number two candidate for succession to the Yotsuba family headship. It was no wonder they'd visit their grandmother. Miyuki wasn't surprised by their presence here in and of itself.

"……Maybe it's just a coincidence?"

"They're not exactly the type who would just pass by while knowing that we're here though."

That's certainly true, Miyuki thought.

"Whether by a wide or narrow margin, it seems fate has decided our missing each other was not to be."

A very noncommittal answer.

Thinking the same thing as her brother, Miyuki's mind wandered back to the events of another chance encounter one night...

Chapter 4

August 4th, AD 2092 / Okinawa - Vacation House ~ Hotel Party

Although we came here on vacation, the bonds of society and family cannot be severed, regrettably. I have just barely become a middle school student but that does not mean that there are no people whose invitation I cannot decline.

Only blood relations which are not very many people, as it is said even the darkest cloud has a silver lining… however, I had completely no intimation that any of those people would be in the same place at the same time as me.

The one who sent the invitation was Kuroba Mitsugu-san. This person is Okaa-sama's cousin.

The hand of the clock is pointing to 6 PM. It is nearly the time that I have to depart the vacation house.

I sat in front of a mirror with a brush in my hand.

"Ha…."

Without thinking, I allowed a sigh to escape from my mouth. The me in the mirror was wearing a distinctly dispirited look.

I am not ill at ease at parties. However, I have just traveled from Tokyo to Okinawa this very day. I wanted to take it easy for at least this evening.

"Miyuki-san, have you finished getting ready?"

After a knock, a voice sounded through the door. It seems that Sakurai-san has come to call on me who is lingering in her own room.

"Uh, yes."

I, who had been contemplating the whispers of my thoughts, reflexively stood up to give my answer.

Interpreting my reply as permission to enter, Sakurai-san opened the door. —Certainly, it could be that kind of signal, so I did not get particularly flustered but,

"What's this? Aren't you all ready to go?"

Seeing that I had changed into a cocktail dress, put on a necklace, a hair band and also had my purse in my hand, Sakurai-san let her feelings show with a painful smile.

"Don't make such a sullen face or all your finery will go to waste."

Could my face be so easy to read?

"……Do you understand?"

It was Sakurai-san I faced; nay, that did not change the fact that it was the eyes of another person. I had no intention of letting anyone be aware of my unhappiness.

"As for me,"

While saying that Sakurai-san purposefully gave an exultant wink. …Is she telling me that it is alright to show other people this kind of face?

"Stop…making fun of me, please."

Without thinking, I made a pouty face. Flustered, I focused on smoothing out my expression into something more ladylike, but...

I could feel my cheeks turning red as I watched Sakurai-san release a giggle.

I am already a middle school student, I thought I had stopped this sort of childish behavior.

"I'm sorry…..but,"

You would not think she was 30 years old — you could only think that she was in her twenties at the most — after she giggled for a while looking cute, Sakurai-san quickly modified her expression.

Naturally, I reined in my emotions as well.

"There are people with sharper 'eyes' than me, since there are many people in this world. Indeed, it is because I know you so well, Miyuki-san, that I'm also very aware of the things you dislike. However, it is also possible that someone who can read your face with a glance might be at the party. Because you, Miyuki-san, are not an ordinary middle school student, I believe you must appear as if there are no gaps in your defenses."

No rebellious feelings were aroused by this well aimed advice.

"….Might there be a good way to do it?"

"No matter how well you intend to conceal them, regrettably, feelings are always portrayed in the color of your eyes and every change of your facial expression."

…Is she saying that nothing can be done?

"What you need to do is to skillfully deceive your own emotions, do you get it? First, you bring you, yourself, in alignment with what you would call your false face."

Possibly because she read my discontent, Sakurai-san continued in greater detail in a soothing manner.

◊ ◊ ◊

As she instructed me to, I shrouded my heart with a false face; since I was still very much a child, I could not stop my spirits from falling as I approached the site of the party.

Kuroba Oji-sama[7] was not a bad person. (Strictly speaking, he was not my uncle.)

It's just that, probably because his wife died young or something, the way he dotes on his children is a little… well, extremely annoying.

Gosh, just what does he think he is doing, bragging about his children to another child? No, this is not how I should feel. He is surely not thinking at all, but I do wish he would confine that topic to his fellow adults.

...Hoo; a sigh escaped my mouth.

Without thought, not consciously.

This was not the time to be expelling sighs. If I am doing this now I may not be able to control myself at the actual party.

I am already within the hotel grounds.

How pointlessly ostentatious — this was only my subjective opinion, but — I could already see the entrance.

The driverless commuter car stopped.

With quick motions, Ani got out of the car, held back the door and begun waiting for me to get out.

My expression stiffened and I advanced on the battlefield of depression and tedium.

In the lobby, there were hard-faced older men, young men, and dignified young women. None of them were trying to stand out, but they were incapable of fooling the eye of I who had been accompanied by people like them from birth.

It was not any of my business, but they made me want to tell them that they should train more.

Naturally, it goes without saying that I was not accompanied by Ani alone this evening.

Two women bodyguards from a security agency with offices around the country were temporarily escorting me.

At the party and on other occasions, there were numerous places where I cannot be with a male companion and the opposite is also true. If Sakurai-san could be here as usual, there would be no need to worry. However, right now she is remaining at Okaa-sama's side.

Okaa-sama is a little unwell and is resting at the vacation house even now. None of that could be helped. But, due to that, I must deal with Oji-sama alone.

How, depressing.

From the outset, even if Chichi[8] could be relied upon, the duty of entertaining relatives should not fall to me, who is both younger and a girl, the duty should belong to the eldest male child.

I glared at the back of Ani who was walking ahead of me in bitterness.

"Oji-sama, I am so grateful for the invitation."

As expected, the location was too big a site for a private party. As expected, an extravagant table was being used as a backdrop. As expected, Oji-sama came out to meet me clad in an expensive suit and I

made the perfunctory greeting. For this kind of thing, there was no reason for creativity.

"I am glad you came, Miyuki-chan. Is your Okaa-sama well?"

Oji-sama replied with exaggerated friendliness.

Only someone like him, still sticks a 'chan' on my name, these days.

And as usual, he ignored Ani's existence as if he were invisible.

Since Ani only stood behind me in silence, it could be that both of them were ignoring each other.

"Oh how kind of you to be concerned. I think she is only a little tired, but I wanted her to take good care of herself today."

"I am so relieved to hear that. Oh sorry, I have kept you out here talking. Now, come inside. Both Ayako and Fumiya will be glad to meet you, Miyuki-chan."

Things that are called natural naturally occur; I expected the two of them to come but…

Despite all the self instruction not to do so, I felt a sigh threatening to leave my mouth.

I attached myself to Oji-sama and went to a table inside the room.

Leaving Ani behind at the entrance.

There was a so called custom of bodyguards placing themselves alongside the wall, ready for action.

Despite being guilty of treating him badly myself, I always felt extremely annoyed when other people treat him as a servant… I am probably just being selfish.

Be that as it may, I am for now forced to deal with the Kuroba family alone and unassisted.

"Ayako-san, Fumiya-kun, are the two of you well?"

Upon my greeting them, Fumiya-kun seemed happy and Ayako-san seemed like she had been waiting for me; their respective smiling faces welcomed me in the usual way.

"Miyuki-neesama! It's been so long."

"Onee-sama, you have not changed at all."

Ayako-san and Fumiya-kun are one grade below me, sixth year elementary school students.

Unlike my brother and I, these two are twins.

They were the same age as me, but because I was born in March and they were born in June they were in a lower grade.

For some reason or other, for as long as I can remember, Ayako-san has always blatantly felt a rivalry with me… This is one more reason dealing with this family was so depressing.

Since the other candidate for successor was not Ayako-san but Fumiya-kun, even if she felt competitive with me…. I was supposed to be concealing my true feelings.

Fumiya-kun is adorable because he is openly affectionate to me, but I feel he is a little too adorable for a boy. At any rate, compared to Ani… no, that person is extraordinary.

I see that their clothes are a little too cutesy again today. I must strain myself to keep my facial muscles from moving.

Even with this air conditioning, is it not too warm to wear something like that in this season, Fumiya-kun?

Even if you are wearing it a casual style, to wear a bolero jacket and a cummerbund….since this is a private party, I do not think it is necessary to go so far.

On the other hand, Ayako-san…..well, as usual is called as usual for a reason. Her dress was abundantly adorned with ribbons, trims, and decorative buttons, and even her above-the-knee socks had ruffles with ribbons on them. Her hair was prettily arranged in curls, and a fringe had been added to her hair band. I do not particularly want to quibble over someone else's taste in attire, but this style is probably a little abnormal at a summer resort.

Since both they and their parent wore (dress up) such clothes, I think they made things overly formal, however.

While I am contemplating such things in order to distract myself, Oji-sama was continuing to brag about my cousins. During his boasting about inconsequential things like Ayako-san receiving a prize in a piano competition and Fumiya-kun being praised by his riding instructor, I made polite responses in all the right places and waited for time to pass.

I always wondered if this was some kind of punishment game. However, each time I am blessedly saved before my patience wears too thin. Today also at any moment now Fumiya-kun would begin to fidget.

"By the way, Miyuki-neesama…where is Tatsuya-niisama?"

Ah, here it comes.

Fumiya-kun is a very nice child, he treats Ayako-san and I the same. To be brief, he adores me as much as if I were really his elder sister, but he adores Ani more than either of us; or you might say that he reveres him.

No, I wonder if admires might be a better way to define it? Even so, well, I cannot say that I do not understand.

In general terms — that is in accordance with the guidelines set by the Magic Federation — Ani is not blessed with a talent for magic. However, that person compensates for that with a surfeit of brains, muscles and special talents.

His school grades are outstandingly excellent.

No matter what sport, he is first class; or possibly super first class.

And, the counter attack that all magicians are vulnerable to is that person's sole trump card.

Surely, Ani is the type of person that all boys might revere as a hero.

No. Surely, not just boys.

His outward appearance is neither amiable, lively nor sweet but despite all that.

Ani is incredibly cool……

……Eh, what on earth am I thinking!?

That person is merely my guard, nothing more.

That person and I only share a sibling relationship through genetics, nothing more.

Why I am acting like I have a brother complex…….

"He is on the watch over there."

As if unaware that a black cloud had suddenly appeared in my heart, I pointed to his position beside the wall while wearing my painstakingly constructed smiling face.

Ah, Fumiya-kun's cheeks are becoming red.

Apparently, I am fooling them.

"….Um, where exactly?"

Next to Fumiya-kun who had taken his eyes off me to search for Ani by letting his eyes wander all over the room, Ayako-san was also sending her eyes hither and thither along the wall while pretending to be indifferent.

Her attitude was unusually easy to read, she was even showing her teeth as she smiled. However, I think that was something she was directing at Fumiya-kun. I pointed out the place where Ani was standing to Fumiya-kun who was standing next to Ayako-san who had allowed her wall of indifference to break.

Ani was watching us.

"Tatsuya-niisama!"

Fumiya-kun's face suddenly lit up and he bounded over to Ani's position.

"Oh well, there′s nothing that can be done."

While voicing a complaint, Ayako-san headed after Fumiya-kun with swift feet. Indeed, she looked as if she was restraining herself from running.

As he watched those two, Oji-sama made a sour face; he did this every time.

Oji-sama slowly walked after them in a completely different mood than Ayako-san's. I too trailed after them.

Fumiya-kun was enthusiastically conversing with Ani about something.

Ani made countless small nods, the corners of his mouth rose slightly, showing a small amount of teeth — he smiled?

That person?

Despite never giving a smile like that to me…….!

"Hey now, Fumiya, Ayako. You shouldn't interfere with Tatsuya-kun's work."

In order to maintain my insincere smile, I had to grasp my hands strongly to keep my fingers from curling into a fist, and placed a smile so painstakingly constructed to look natural that Oji-sama would not doubt that it reflected my true feelings.

"Thank you for your work. You are so diligent in performing your tasks."

"There is no need to thank me."

The Ani that faced Oji-sama was the usual Ani. His face was so devoid of expression that the smile that had been on his face a little while ago seemed like an illusion.

"Aw, Otou-sama. Wouldn't a moment or two be alright? Miyuki-neesama is our invited guest. Making the arrangements to prevent harm befalling one's guest is the duty of the host."

"It's just as Onee-sama said. The guards of Kuroba are not so unskilled as to allow a single one of our guests to be less than completely safe. Isn't that right, Otou-san?"

Eh? Fumiya-kun doesn't address Oji-sama as "Otou-sama"……

By concentrating on such a trivial thing, I was able to distract myself from my mood.

"That is true but……"

Paying my thoughts no mind, Oji-sama spoke ambiguous words while looking bewildered.

I was bewildered as well. However, perhaps, Ayako-san and Fumiya-kun understood Oji-sama's true intent. Oji-sama did not like his own children — especially Fumiya-kun — directing any friendly interest at Ani.

Fumiya-kun is a candidate who aims to become the next head of the Yotsuba.

Ani is simply the guard of a fellow candidate for the succession, me. Even if we place a special title on them like Guardian, they are servants after all. If I speak cruelly, they are no more than tools to be used and then thrown away.

A tool that, if I can be precise, could not become a candidate for the Yotsuba succession.

Naturally, while Ani is the one who is my guard, since the relationship between Ani and Fumiya-kun is only that of second cousins, there is no real problem with Fumiya-kun adoring Ani. It is the same with Ayako-san. Maya Obaa-sama would probably not be bothered by that.

It sounds harsh when I say it, but Oji-sama is only worried about status. Oji-sama can only see Ani as a servant, a disposable tool. All that means is that the person called Kuroba Mitsugu is probably a "Yotsuba" to the marrow of his bones. Therefore, I feel that I am not mistaken in believing that he feels that having his own children showing empathy for a tool is improper.

That is the natural way of things for a "Yotsuba".

In order for me to become 'Yotsuba Miyuki', I must have the same mental attitude as Oji-sama.

That he is a Guardian is more important than him being my elder brother.

That person has the position of my guard. If it is necessary, he will exchange his own life in order to fulfill his obligation to protect me as a human shield.

It is only natural for that person who is a tool not to love me; I too, must not yearn for love from that person.

I gave myself these instructions.

Like an incantation, I repeated them over and over.

Ani has the position of my guard.

He is my human shield.

That is the position granted to Ani. I must become the heir of Maya Obaa-sama, therefore Ani is not my Onii-sama—

I stiffened due to a pain in the core of my brain.

For an instant, I felt as if I had no idea where I was.

Of course that was an illusion. I am at Kuroba Oji-sama's party that I was invited to; in front of me, Oji-sama is making a discomfited face.

……Somehow I feel like I was thinking about something really important, however….that's probably just my imagination.

"…Fumiya, do not trouble your honored father so much."

Unexpectedly, the one who tossed Oji-sama a lifeline was Ani.

He called Fumiya-kun, 'Fumiya'.

In an affectionate tone as if Fumiya-kun really was his younger brother.

Deep inside my mind, I felt a faint pain.

Without thinking, my face started to scowl in discomfort.

I must not.

If I show displeasure on my face now, it will be misinterpreted as disapproval of Ani and Oji-sama's interaction.

……I wonder if that would be a misinterpretation…….?

No, No, if I think about that!

Uumm, what can I do at a time like this?

Before I left, Sakurai-san told me what to do.

That's right, I need to skillfully deceive my own feelings—

"Kuroba-san, it is all right to entrust the party site to you? I myself wish to take a little look around outside."

"Oh, really? That is a splendid idea."

Oji-sama showed tremendous surprise at Ani's suggestion, and even calculatingly praised Ani for it.

"Understood. I will look after Miyuki-chan. This place is under my supervision so I will accept responsibility."

That is probably insincere praise that can be produced at any time.

Since there are diplomatic excuses to get rid of pests, I should use one to rid myself of the biggest one.

A truly convenient false face.

'First you bring you, yourself, in alignment with what you would call your false face.'

—Ani is faithfully performing the duties allotted to him.

"Aw nuts! We are returning to Shizuoka tomorrow! We do not often get a chance to see each other, and we don't even get a chance to spend a lot of time talking."

"Fumiya, calm down a little……Tatsuya-san, what Fumiya said is true, so please return quickly."

"Understood. I will take one tour around and then return. So, then Kuroba-san I am going to get a little air."

—Therefore I too, must perform the duties allotted to me with all my strength.

While I listened to Ani replying to Fumiya-kun's protests and Ayako-san's requests in a gentle voice, I instructed myself thus.

Chapter 5

November 6th, AD 2095 / Yotsuba Main House - Reception Room

——Hee-hee—

At the sudden sound of Miyuki's giggling voice, Tatsuya, who had been looking out the window, turned his eyes to the interior of the room.

In contrast to the eastern style of the architecture, the big room was done in western style. There were even paintings of landscapes adorning the brightly hued walls, not reproductions either; according to the signatures of the celebrated modern artists on the canvases, these were original oil paintings. And the stately natural wood table was of a size that could easily seat over ten people.

Nonetheless, this room gave an impression of emptiness. This was possibly due to the fact that, instead of the space being occupied by the legs of over ten chairs, there was only the four legs of a sofa placed by the table; also, aside from the table and sofa, there were almost no furnishings, which appeared to leave all too much space leftover in the room. Making the room feel unnecessarily vast was probably for the purpose of psychologically inducing a feeling of oppression.

Naturally, such things had been beneath Tatsuya's notice for a long time now. His gaze went straight to his younger sister.

Upon receiving his puzzled look, Miyuki, who was seated on the sofa with the carved ball and claw legs, bashfully ducked her head.

"…..Pardon me, Onii-sama. I was merely remembering something that happened in the past."

"Something amusing?"

Tatsuya also smiled in response to the smile on Miyuki's face when she answered.

"No…… I was so foolish in the past, I found that humorous."

Tatsuya's smile vanished, a feat that occurred in the blink of an eye in response to the thoughtless self depreciating remark. But he was unable to find anything negative in the content of the words, the tone of the voice, or the expression on her face.

"Come to think of it, Onii-sama back then was kind to Ayako-san and Fumiya-kun……. I was quite shocked by that?"

From what she said, Tatsuya formed an impression of the general period Miyuki was remembering and broke out a smile.

"Well….I was just a child back then, give me a break."

"That is absurd. I am the one who was a foolish child."

The two of them were still at an age where the world could still call them "children". And the siblings themselves also didn't think of themselves as adults.

Despite that, the two of them experienced no feelings of inconsistency or hesitation when they labeled the people they had been three years prior as mere "children".

"Back then, even though I am your sister, I did not understand one thing about Onii-sama. No….I did not even want to understand you."

Tatsuya wanted to say something to refute that, but aside from a brief smile bestowed on the bowed head of his sister, unfortunately he had no other response to give.

Even if he could refute her words, it was not necessary to do so.

Although both of them had been wrong, neither of them were responsible; Tatsuya and Miyuki were both aware of this.

If Miyuki was no longer in the mood to continue speaking of the past, Tatsuya was not going to bring it up again.

Tatsuya returned his gaze to the window.

While appearing to blankly gaze outside, his five senses were fully operational, looking for signs of unusual activity and missing nothing. His extra sense perceived more than his five senses, so he was always ready to access the information dimension at a moment's notice.

This was all for the sake of protecting Miyuki.

If something came into existence that looked like it would harm Miyuki, Tatsuya would destroy it first to prevent that.

This had not changed between now and back then.

But back then, she had been unaware of it.

But back then, she had been kept from being aware of it by him.

Chapter 6

August 5th, AD 2092 / Okinawa - Villa ~ Coast of Onna

Last night had continued until considerably late. Arriving at Okinawa then having a party until near midnight made for a pretty tough first day.

Yet, even so, for me to wake before the sun had risen, could only be explained as habit.

Truth be told, I had wanted to sleep a little longer, but I didn't want to turn into a loose lady. Falling asleep again would be unthinkable. With effort, I sent energy to my limbs, got off the bed and drew back the curtains, opening the window to let in some fresh air while I was at it. Since I'm on the second floor facing the backyard, there was no worry about being seen in my pajamas from the outside. ……Although taking care of my appearance first really would have been more fitting of a lady's etiquette.

Sniffing the sea breeze I inhaled deeply, swelling my chest out.

And at the moment I looked down, there was my brother training.

Crouched down low, he'd take a step with the right foot, thrust out his right arm, thrust out his left arm.

Then in that position he'd take a step with the left foot, and just as I thought he'd thrust out his left arm again he rapidly pulled it back, and as if intersecting, thrust out his right arm.

Turning his body as he progressively took steps with the left foot and right foot, his right arm would forcefully move from inside to outside, left arm from outside to inside, right hand up, left hand down.

It seemed like some sort of martial arts or karate I didn't know.

In each hand he held a small - one kilogram - weight, with which he went through motions with great precision. They were as vivid as the set poses used by lead dancers or stage actors.

Making his way in a circle around the fringe of half the backyard, my brother finally stopped moving, exhaling deeply and relaxing.

-Eh, it's over……?

I stared with bad grace at my brother's back as he took a deep breath, willing him to show me that beautiful 'dance' again.

Let me see more.

Just once is fine.

That amazing form of yours, to your little sister……

—Wait!

I regained myself.

—No way, I had been entranced?

I closed the curtains in a rush, then hurried from the window.

The curtain rails made a pretty big noise, but it wouldn't be audible from the yard…… I think.

I leaned against the wall and collapsed down.

My face was hot.

My heart was pounding away furiously and wouldn't calm down even as I held my hands against my chest.

—He hadn't realized, right?

My brother hadn't looked up even once.

He shouldn't have seen me standing at the window.

Yet despite that, as I had stood staring as if enchanted, I had the feeling that my brother had noticed me too.

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As always, my breakfast was provided by Sakurai-san. This villa also technically had an automatic cooking machine managed by a HAR, but Sakurai-san herself had insisted that 'those who rely on automatic machines become insipid' and as such, all her meals were homemade unless under extraordinary circumstances.

Recently, I had taken a hand in helping too, but truth be told, my skills are still very much in the 'getting there' stage.

"Do you have any plans for today?"

As I sipped tea after the meal, Sakurai-san asked that question. In form that would have been addressed to Okaa-sama, but I knew full well it applied to me too.

"If the heat lets up, I'd like to go out to sea."

Thinking a little, Okaa-sama gave her reply.

"Shall I ready the cruiser?"

"Hmm..... a smaller sailing yacht would be nice."

"Understood. Is 4 PM alright?"

"Yes, please."

With experience, Sakurai-san smoothly inferred the specifics from Okaa-sama's brief words and deduced her intentions, efficiently assembling a schedule.

This means my timetable for past 4 PM has been decided as well. Okaa-sama most likely intends to spend the time until then inside the villa.

Now, what shall I do?

"Miyuki-san, if you have no particular plans, how about going to the beach? Even if you just lie down, I think it'd be a good way to refresh yourself."

Seeing me lost in thought, Sakurai-san made a suggestion.

"……I guess so. Then, I suppose I'll just relax on the beach in the afternoon."

"I'll help you prepare. Ufufu, if you're wearing a swimsuit then you'll need to carefully apply sunscreen to each and every little part of your body."

……Eh? 'Ufufu', that's……

"……No, thank you. I can do it by myself."

"Now now, there's no need to refrain."

……Sakurai-san strangely seems to be anticipating something.

"The sunlight here in the tropics is intense. If you leave a gap somewhere, it'll be terrible."

……Sakurai-san, that look in your eyes is very suspicious.

"Naturally we'd have to cover all the bits under the swimsuit too. Ufufufu……"

"Uh, uhmm, Sakurai-san?"

Sakurai-san, for some reason, you look really scary right now!

"Come on, let's go get ready."

I attempted to slip away in silence, but before I could move an inch, Sakurai-san had her hand around my wrist.

Her grip wasn't so tight as to be painful, but there was definitely no shaking her off.

I was dragged like that up to the second floor, and when I glimpsed at my brother, I had the distinct feeling he was laughing underneath his expressionless face.

……Even though he's not supposed to have any such human feelings.

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Under Sakurai-san's hands, sun cream really was rubbed very thoroughly over every inch of my body, and by the time I stumbled out from the villa to the beach, I was limp all over.

'……Why do I have to be so tired over this?' I complained unreasonably to myself.

In any case, I assumed what I considered a modest easygoing posture, took off my tunic, then went under the parasol my brother had set up and on top of the sheet my brother had prepared and laid down.

The separated swimsuit I wore wasn't quite as far gone as a bikini, but still possessed quite a fair amount of exposure. It wasn't something I would

have chosen, but then again Sakurai-san hadn't exactly given me much of a choice.

That's what I thought anyway, but at the sight of me, my brother wasn't moving an inch. Wearing knee-length trunks under a parka, he was seated next to me with his eyes on the horizon.

Knees slightly bent, looking as if spacing out.

When I stole a glance over, it was as if he wasn't even aware of me, simply staring into the distance. I wonder if he's bored?

He's a healthy, fit boy in his first year at junior high, but with the sea right in front of him, all he did was sit. That was it.

Is this normal? Driven by that question, I moved myself with my elbows, and sneaked a glance at the other parasols dotted around.

That's a…… family I think. A mother and father, and a girl probably in her first or second year of primary school.

Just as I thought so, a boy slightly older than the girl came running up from the beach.

The boy took his father's hand, and seemed as if trying to pull him over to the sea.

The parasol next to theirs was vacant. There were various belongings indicating the presence of two people. ……There are two parkas, which means two people right?

Those two were probably down by the sea as well.

Beyond that was…… whoawhoawhoa!

I put my head down in a hurry.

After attempting another peek, I was forced to lower my head again almost immediately.

There, a guy around senior high— I don't think he was a university student yet— was rubbing oil over a girl.

In some pretty dangerous areas too. Hey, is he going for full body coverage?

And in such an openly public place at that, aren't, aren't they embarrassed at all?

The guy at least didn't have to worry about being seen. Stroking away at the girl's body, he was laughing quite happily. It wasn't a very pleasant expression to see.

Do guys like doing that sort of thing?

A more outgoing woman would laugh— Sakurai-san definitely would laugh, but I had read in a magazine somewhere that men like touching women. I've also heard from friends at school that when 'advanced' senpais go out on a date, they have trouble with their boyfriends seeking after their body. Just what do they think girls are, I indignantly felt at the time. That terrible age of 'free sex' ended half a century ago! Besides which, you're doing those things to a junior high student!

……Not good, not good. Calm down. I can't go causing a frost on the beach in Okinawa in the middle of summer.

But, the woman didn't seem to be against it.

It might just be because she's lying down prone the same as me and not readily visible, but since the guy is being allowed to go right ahead I'm guessing she's okay with it.

……The same as me?

Here's me lying down, and there's that person sitting next to me.

I wonder, is he thinking something similar? Is he capable of such a thing?

I craned my neck slightly, looking again at my brother's face, and my brother was looking at me.

Our eyes met.

In contrast to me who was frozen still, he simply continued to look around for two, three seconds, before turning back to face the horizon.

I regained control of my body with difficulty and, unable to say anything, simply hid my now heated face with my arm.

I thought about undoing my hair and using it as a curtain of sorts, but could see it becoming troublesome eventually.

Lying prone, I could do nothing but wait for my cheeks to cool down.

With my view obscured so, my - now back to normal - head began to fill with all sorts of thoughts I really shouldn't have been thinking about.

He, just when had he begun looking at me?

What part of me was he looking at?

My back? Legs? Or……

I wonder, does this person have the same interests? Was he thinking he'd like to touch my body, or something……?

I knew I really shouldn't be thinking such things about my blood-related sibling. But my brother and I weren't quite that straightforward.

Even though we live in the same house, we rarely see each other.

The only times we're together, including to and from school, is when we're out. Being together during the day like now only happens during trips.

For as far back as I can remember, I have no memories of taking baths together, playing together, or anything at all.

To me, my brother is not so much family, but rather more like a one year older boy I know. Those are my true feelings.

It's probably the same for him.

For him, I'm most likely just someone attending the same school, a one year younger girl……

Unexpectedly, I heard the sound of sand shifting.

I knew it must have been my brother getting up.

I couldn't raise my head.

Rather, my face simply sank further down into my arm which was serving as a pillow.

I tried willing strength into my arms, legs, and back, and found out my body had other ideas.

Inside my stiff body, my heart violently pounded away.

I sensed my brother looming over me.

I couldn't breathe.

My head was in a daze.

It's too early for that to be because of oxygen deprivation, a rational part of my mind calmly and uselessly told me.

My body, which simply refused all instruction to move, was softly covered by a thin cloth.

—Eh?

I could feel the fabric, stretching from my shoulders to my thighs.

It was the tunic I had taken off earlier.

That suitably folded tunic, was now spread over my body.

Somehow, suddenly, I felt a sense of security.

All my meaningless tension disappeared, and perhaps as a consequence my mind began to drift instead.

Without allowing myself any further self-analysis, I felt myself lulled into a comfortable sense of drowsiness.

In the end, I really do have to be thankful to Sakurai-san. Despite the fact I was under a parasol, I had slept in that fierce sunlight for quite a while. If I hadn't been guarded by sunscreen all the way up to my nails, my bare legs would no doubt be suffering terrible burns by now.

"So hot……"

As I blamed the interruption to my sleep on the relentless heat, my brother was, as expected, still next to me watching the horizon.

"……How long have I slept?"

"Around two hours."

I asked a question without warning.

And yet, he answered without a moment's hesitation.

Almost as if to head off any other questions.

The answer felt rushed, like he didn't want to give me time to think.

"I see."

I vaguely felt that something was up, but my head was still fuzzy from having just awoken, and I wasn't able to put a finger on that sense of discomfort.

As I got up, my tunic slipped off onto the sheet.

Perhaps because of the sea breeze blowing sand everywhere, despite the fact I had slept on a sheet, the surface under my limbs felt a little rough.

"I'm going into the water."

Without waiting for a reply, I hooked on my sandals.

All around the sheet, numerous footprints were evident. They hadn't been there before. Some parts had been flattened, resembling the backs of people who had fallen over. Perhaps some people had been playing beach volleyball……?

The number of surrounding parasols had decreased as well.

It seems a lot had happened while I was asleep, I thought lazily, as I headed down to the beach.

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After a late lunch, I spent some time reading in my room. However, after two hours I became bored. It's not that I dislike reading, I simply didn't really feel like it today.

I guess I'll go show Okaa-sama my magic practice.

Thinking that, I went to her room.

My room is in the very middle of the 2nd floor.

Okaa-sama's room is across from the stairs, on the other side.

The room opposite mine is empty, and the one next to the stairs belongs to my brother.

Passing by it, I heard a voice from inside.

Without thinking, I paused.

This resort is pretty standard, meaning that unlike our home, it's not fully soundproofed; yet despite that, it's not so cheap that normal voices could be heard from the hallway. For them to be audible, they must be speaking very loudly.

Not to mention that that voice just now, was Sakurai-san's? Instinctively, I pressed my ear to the door.

"How could you leave a terrible blow like this without treatment!"

Sakurai-san was probably scolding my brother.

"It's nothing major. There is no compromising damage to the bone."

"Don't act as if everything's fine as long as nothing's broken! Doesn't it hurt!?"

"There is pain. However, it's nothing more than a penalty I have set upon myself."

Pain?

Penalty?

—What are they talking about?

"Haa…… you're always like this…… Tatsuya-kun, I've already given up trying to correct that mentality of yours but……

At least let me heal you up with magic, so take off your clothes please."

Always?

"There is no need. If it becomes a hindrance in combat, it will repair itself."

"……Tatsuya-kun, even Guardians have a day to day life. Because we aren't merely fighting machines. Speaking of which, about that incident, it would have been better for you to simply wake Miyuki-san and leave. As Guardians, though we should respect our charge's will and freedom to the utmost, that's no reason to get into a fight just because you don't want to interfere with a nap."

……Eh? Me?

"I am regretful."

"Seriously, please think this incident over alright? Running is also a perfectly respectable tactic. Tatsuya-kun, you need to learn to be more flexible."

I didn't hear the sound of a sigh, but rather sensed that Sakurai-san had done so as she sagged her shoulders and prepared to leave.

In a hurry, as quietly as I could, I went back to my room.

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The cruiser Sakurai-san had prepared was a six-seater sailing ship with an electric motor attached.

The four of us along with the helmsman and his assistant filled the boat to full capacity.

I sat awaiting departure on seats arranged face to face. Directly across from me is Okaa-sama, and next to me is my brother.

Pretending to watch the sails being set up, I shot a glimpse at my brother's profile.

He was intent upon their work, and didn't notice my gaze.

Ever since I had overheard their conversation, I couldn't help thinking about it.

My brother is my escort.

Getting injured in the course of protecting me is to be expected.

But up until now, I have rarely ever seen my brother injured.

Direct confrontation like yesterday's are also rare.

Speaking of his injuries, they had all been from training.

Which was why I, despite being a successor candidate to the Yotsuba, had always naively assumed that there were very few humans who would be despicable enough to pick on us children.

Such a thing may be so in novels, but reality is different.

At Fumiya-kun's place, unlike the Yotsuba, Ojisama's work seemed to be more out of convenience.

The 'Guardian' attached to me is iconically associated with a successor candidate of the Yotsuba.

Therefore a part of me had always thought that for a child like my brother to be assigned as a Guardian had been for the sake of giving my

magically-lacking brother a place in the Yotsuba. And another part has always felt guilty for doing so.

But from the conversation those two had earlier, injuries seem to be something par for the course.

"Miyuki-san, is something bothering you?"

"Ah, no, it's nothing."

At that unexpected voice, I turned around in a hurry.

Not good, not good.

I made Okaa-sama worry.

"It's been a while since I've gone sailing……"

"Ah, that's right."

Pretending to watch the sails being set up seems to have worked out.

But that won't put them off indefinitely, and I decide to shelve my thoughts for now.

Just in time, it seems we're about to depart.

Despite the fact that we're not using the motor, we drew away from the pier at a greater speed than I expected.

I focused my thoughts on the flowing scenery.

In the face of a westerly wind, we were headed in a north-northwest direction.

Since I had assumed that in summer along Okinawa, a southeasterly wind should be blowing, I asked the captain about it, to which he replied that a low pressure area was approaching from the Eastern sea.

I was also told that it wouldn't grow into a typhoon, so I shouldn't be concerned.

I hadn't even been aware of that, so my worries did go up…… but it's not like I've been at sea for any long period of time, so it's probably just a needless anxiety.

Although we were sailing towards Iejima, the point of the trip itself was sailing so we had planned to turn back halfway. With the current wind speed though, by the time we were halfway it'd be dusk already.

Sailing is more comfortable than I had anticipated.

It felt like my confused heart was being swept away by the wind.

If I had known, I would have liked to leave earlier and go further.

I closed my eyes, and for a while simply listened to the sound of the wind in the sails.

If we can end the day like this, I should be able to sleep very comfortably tonight.

—Should, because I knew that this couldn't last.

Upon feeling a particularly sharp wind, I opened my eyes.

Sakurai-san was looking sternly out to sea, or rather, glaring.

The words the assistant uttered as he desperately appealed into the radio — submarine? In this situation, I don't think it's the Navy. Could it possibly be foreign? These are Japanese territorial waters though. Don't tell me…… an act of aggression!?

It wasn't only me starting to fret. As if the ship itself had pushed the panic button, the motor squeaked as it started up and the sails were stowed.

As the rudder swung round the cruiser tilted, and I grabbed on to the rail.

"Ojou-sama, please go to the front."

Although I knew this wasn't a good time, my brother calling me 'Ojou-sama' all of a sudden was a pretty big shock.

It's something that happens often, but to be called in such a way as if I were a stranger saddened me.

In response, my attitude unnecessarily hardened.

"I know!"

With that utterly uncalled for and meaninglessly high pressured line, I complied and left my seat.

I observed the foaming sea.

Although my brother had his back to me and I couldn't see his face, I just knew what sort of eyes he was making just as sure as if I had taken his hand.

Neither glaring, nor staring.

—Simply expressionless and empty, those eyes of the void.

Sakurai-san stood on the stern side, protecting Okaa-sama.

Okaa-sama is an exceptionally powerful magician, but her strength has been down because of it recently. The interactions between magic and the body is still not fully understood, but it is known that using powerful magic has a proportional strain on the body.

She mustn't be allowed to use magic.

Reaching that thought, I took my CAD out from my pouch in a hurry.

Sakurai-san already had her CAD on standby.

And my brother was—empty handed, just standing there.

From behind our wake, two black shadows rapidly approached in our direction.

Dolphins? Like hell they were!

I could identify those intuitively.

Torpedoes!? Without any warning whatsoever!?

As I was frozen, my brother standing in front of me made an inexplicable gesture. He raised his right hand out to sea, at those looming black shadows.

Without a CAD, you do know there's no meaning in making the motions right?

Even if only in the least, you're still a magician right!?

I was cursing inside. Not only irritation at my brother imitating the gestures without knowing their true purpose, but irritation at his powerlessness as well.

With those thoughts in my mind, I looked up at Sakurai-san. As Okaa-sama's Guardian, surely she would do something in place of my brother's uselessness, and berate him for his escapism.

But I was off.

Faster than Sakurai-san could activate anything, my brother, like a flash of thunder in the clouds, unleashed magic.

It was over so fast, I didn't even realize it was a sign magic had been invoked for a moment.

Both the torpedoes sank towards the bottom of the sea.

As they sank, the shadows expanded. The torpedoes had disintegrated?

Just what had this person done……?

Without a magical aid or anything……?

As doubt and denial warred in my mind, the magician inside me told me this phenomena was without a doubt caused by my brother, who had used an unbelievably advanced magic to interfere with the information structure of the torpedoes and achieve an extreme state of decomposition.

This person, who, apart from the ability to neutralize another's magic, should not have any magical ability himself, had……?

Could it be that I don't actually know the least bit about this brother of mine?

I didn't actually understand anything about him at all?

As Sakurai-san continued to work magic under the water, I simply stared at my brother's back, reverted to the child he seemingly appeared to be on the outside.

Chapter 7

November 6th, AD 2095 / Yotsuba Main House - Drawing room

Tatsuya, who had been looking out the window until now, suddenly looked over at the doorway.

While the house seemed like a traditional Japanese house on the outside, the inside was an unscrupulous compromise between east and west. An appropriate description may be a Japanese-Western style mansion. The rooms were either purely Japanese or purely Western.

This drawing room—the 'audience hall', was Western style. The wallpaper, ceiling, floor and windows, along with the lighting and furniture were all Western.

The doorway had a wooden door.

As Tatsuya stared, a knocking noise sounded from that door.

Miyuki said 'come in' while still seated on the sofa, and a voice replied 'excuse me' as the door opened. Wearing an apron over a kimono, a 'maid' appeared. ……According to the image of the house, perhaps 'meido' would have been more appropriate, but it was difficult to get past that anachronistic impression.

That 'maid' bowed deeply, before standing aside.

A man wearing a suit stood behind her.

That man was someone Tatsuya knew very well.

Miyuki covered her mouth with a hand. It seemed to have dropped open of its own accord.

While not to the same extent as Tatsuya, Miyuki also tentatively knew this man.

As the man entered the room the maid bowed again, before leaving and closing the door without any explanation. It seems that she had only been a guide.

"It's been while, Tatsuya. Well, actually I guess it's only been a week."

"Major…… why are, no, you were called by our aunt, right?"

Asking for a reason, Tatsuya swapped the 'question' for a 'statement' halfway through. There's no reason for Kazama to visit the Yotsuba, so conversely, it was obvious the reason he was here was because he had been called.

"That is correct. However, I had not heard that you'd be attending as well."

"…..I am sorry."

The one who had apologized was Miyuki, who had stood up the moment Kazama entered the room.

Kazama had simply been stating a fact. He was not small-minded enough to be upset over such a trivial matter.

Knowing that Tatsuya had simply shrugged, but Miyuki could not so easily put aside the bungling of her relatives.

"It is not something to be concerned over."

Kazama and Miyuki did not have much correspondence.

In fact, they had never met without Tatsuya also being present.

Which was why Kazama, in the presence of a third party, was not quite as frank with Miyuki as he would normally be with Tatsuya. Nevertheless, being in Tatsuya's presence all the time, he couldn't help but think of her as simply 'Tatsuya's little sister'.

Still, while the number of times they have met is not as much, she had first met him at the same time as Tatsuya.

Their acquaintance with Kazama sprung from the events of three years ago.

Chapter 8

August 5th, AD 2092 / Okinawa - Villa

By the time the Coast Guard of the Defense Forces rushed over, the submarine had disappeared.

Sakurai-san was fuming at how utterly outrageous it was that they hadn't noticed it entering our territorial waters, but to be honest, I wasn't as interested.

Rather than assigning blame, I simply wanted some rest.

Not so much for physical fatigue, but mental exhaustion.

We were asked by the person in charge of the Coast Guard that they'd like a summary of the incident, but I wasn't in the mood at the time. Not just me, but both Okaa-sama and Sakurai-san also felt the same. We told him that if there was anything in particular they wanted, they could come visit, and we returned to the villa.

Right now, I'm lying in my room.

I had taken a shower, but my head was still unclear.

What lingered in my mind like storm clouds in the rainy season, was the magic my brother had shown. If I wasn't mistaken, he had directly modified the information structure of the objects and decomposed them.

But as I recall, directly interfering with information structures is classified as amongst the highest rank of difficulty in magic. Never-mind me, it's possible even Okaa-sama or Aunt wouldn't be able to do it.

And yet that person, without even using a CAD……

That person, hadn't he been removed as a successor candidate because he lacked magical talent?

Wasn't it because he couldn't use magic that he was assigned as my escort instead?

As long as I can remember, as well as from what I've been told, aside from the non-systematic anti-magic 'Gram Dispersion', I have never seen him use any high level magic.

Because he was unable to use the systematic magic of mainstream modern magic adequately, he took advantage of his high physical skill and his specific anti-magic ability to achieve a place in the Yotsuba—that was supposedly the reason my brother was my Guardian.

I don't get it.

I don't get it at all.

We're family, siblings, and yet I know nothing whatsoever.

Even the fact that I know nothing, I didn't realize until today.

I was appalled.

Come to think of it, this is the first real trip I've had since starting junior high.

I wonder, was yesterday the first time he had escorted me alone in the truest sense of the term?

I was six, and he was seven.

That was the age from which my brother became my escort, and I was to be escorted by him.

In the six years since, my brother has always been my escort.

But there's no way that you'd fully entrust the protection of one who may be the target of kidnap and assault to a primary school kid.

I see, so that's why I didn't know that person's true worth, his real capabilities……

Then, who could I ask to know who that person truly is? Who really knows him?

Okaa-sama? Sakurai-san? Or maybe Aunt?

Just as I found a clue to escaping the maze of my thoughts, or so I thought, a knock came from the door.

Caught off guard, I got off the bed in a hurry, and as I combed my hair, I asked what it was.

"I'm sorry to disturb your rest. The military is here, and would like to hear about the event……"

Sakurai-san's hesitant voice came from the other side of the door.

"From me?"

As I opened the door, I asked back. It wasn't terribly respectful, I knew as I spoke, but I really was quite surprised.

"Yes…… I told them that Tatsuya-kun and I could answer any questions they might have, but……"

Sakurai's expression was very apologetic, even though it wasn't her fault……

If she acts like that, I'm the one who's going to be in pain.

"I understand. Are they in the living room?"

Seeing Sakurai-san's nod, I told her that I'd get changed then be right down.

The soldier who came to talk with us identified himself as Captain Kazama Harunobu.

After finishing his introduction, he went straight to the point.

"……So, did you discover the submarine by chance?"

"The one who discovered the submarine had been the boat captain. If you'd like to know the circumstances concerning that, you should talk with him."

"Did you notice any characteristics that could identify its registry?"

"It was submerged throughout. Making out specifics was impossible. Even if it had surfaced, I don't know much about submarines."

The questions and answers were exchanged between the Captain and Sakurai-san.

Okaa-sama seemed content to leave everything to Sakurai-san, and since I hadn't been very composed at the time, even if I were inclined to speak, there wasn't much that I could add.

"Apparently, torpedoes were fired? Do you have any idea why they attacked?"

"None whatsoever!"

Sakurai-san seemed quite irritated. She had been dissatisfied with the response of the military from the start, and at the implied 'You guys probably did something to provoke them right?' question which made even me feel slightly chagrined, it was no wonder she'd become angry.

"—I think you're missing something."

Still being glared at by Sakurai-san, the Captain turned to face my brother. It was probably simply an act, without any deeper meaning behind it. A new venture, in order to soften the clashing atmosphere between these two.

"In order to leave no witnesses, it is possible to infer that perhaps they were trying to abduct us."

My brother's answer however, went far beyond simply clearing up any discontent.

"Abduct?"

The Captain made an expression of surprise; yet intrigued at the same time, he urged my brother to explain further.

"The torpedoes fired at our cruiser were foam torpedoes."

"Oh.....?"

Foam torpedoes?..... Foam producing torpedoes, I guess? Meaning that they produce bubbles……?

"Foam torpedoes? What are those?"

Just as I turned my head, Sakurai-san asked my brother in my place.

The reason she didn't ask the Captain was probably because she still wasn't fully over it yet.

"The torpedo warhead is filled with chemicals designed to produce large quantities of foam in a sustained reaction. In that froth-filled water, propellers would be useless. A ship with a high center of gravity like our sailing ship would likely be overturned as well. In doing so, the target is trapped, and the crew can be captured under the disguise of an accident."

"Why do you think so?"

The Captain was looking at my brother with great interest.

I was simply surprised that he knew such things.

"The cruiser's communications had been jammed. Doing so is always mandatory if attempting to fake an accident."

Noticing our communications were disabled in a situation like that, surprised me even further.

"……Sorry, but deducing their armament based on that alone, is rather weak in my opinion."

"Naturally, I didn't judge based on just that."

"You have further evidence?"

"Yes."

"That is?"

"I refuse to answer."

"……"

Being told that without any hesitation whatsoever, the Captain couldn't seem to find anything to say.

Well, Sakurai-san and I were speechless as well.

"Do you need evidence?"

"……No, that won't be necessary."

At my brother's relentless pace, the Captain seemed to be slightly at a loss.

"Captain, could we end soon? I don't think there's anything further we can say that would be of help."

Okaa-sama, who had until now, remained silent save to introduce herself earlier, suddenly spoke in a bored tone.

A bored, yet hard to resist tone.

The Captain immediately recognised that air of dismissal.

"Fair enough. Thank you for your cooperation."

Saying so, the Captain rose and saluted.

My brother and I saw the Captain and his subordinates out.

A car was parked outside, and next to it, two well conditioned soldiers stood to attention.

One of them, upon seeing my brother, widened his eyes in surprise.

I also remembered him. He was the bad soldier from yesterday, one of the 'Left Blood's--

"I see."

Seeing the look of astonishment in the soldier, Captain Kazama nodded in understanding.

"You're the boy who took down Joe?"

At the Captain's words, I reflexively went on the defensive.

However looking at the Captain as he laughed merrily, it didn't seem like he held any tension whatsoever. My brother hadn't reacted at all.

"Mastering the technique of Inner Striking[9] at such a young age, you're quite the genius."

Despite being scrutinized from head to toe, my brother didn't show a hint of unwillingness at all. But what is this 'inner strike'?

It's a very advanced sounding term……

"Lance Corporal Higaki!"

Having his name shouted out in such a loud voice, the bad soldier from yesterday trembled and winced.

Under the Captain's strong gaze, he ran up before him.

The Captain glanced at the man as he saluted and stood to attention.

Then he turned to face my brother, and bowed.

"My subordinate acted very rudely to you yesterday. I give my apologies."

At this utterly unexpected sight, I was completely lost for words.

With his arms folded behind his back, legs apart and head slightly inclined, it was a rather sloppy bow from the view of public courtesy, but for a rugged soldier like the Captain to apologize so gracefully to a child like my brother was too overwhelming.

"I am Lance Corporal Higaki Joseph! For my unbecoming conduct yesterday, I am very sorry!"

Following up the Captain, completely different from yesterday, Lance Corporal Higaki tensely uttered those words as he in contrast bowed deeply.

It seems he wasn't really a bad guy.

Furthermore, he seemed to be pretty terrified of the Captain.

"—I accept your apology."

In the space of a breath, my brother answered.

"Thank you very much!"

I also had no objection.

I hadn't intended to speak in the first place.

Followed by Lance Corporal Higaki, Captain Kazama proceeded to the large open topped car, then stopped three steps away and looked back.

"Shiba Tatsuya-kun, was it? At the moment, I'm serving as the instructor of an airborne magician squad at Onna base. If you're free, come visit us sometime. I'm sure you'll find something of interest."

Captain Kazama spoke those parting words and, without waiting for a reply, climbed into the car.

Chapter 9

August 6th, AD 2092 / Okinawa - Villa ~ Onna Air Force Base

On the morning of the third day of our vacation, a storm began to brew.

The skies were overcast, and strong winds blew.

It seems a tropical storm was approaching from the Eastern sea.

Apparently by the time it blows up here it won't have the strength of a typhoon, but from the looks of it, it would come pretty close.

Every channel was advising it would be best to avoid marine spots, but I don't think anyone would be in a beach-going mood in this weather anyway. Boats were obviously out of the question.

We would be here for two weeks, so there was no need to overdo anything for just these few days.

"What are your plans for today?"

As she passed freshly baked bread to Okaa-sama, Sakurai-san asked that question.

"In this weather, even shopping would be……"

Tilting her head slightly, Okaa-sama muttered to herself. Making that gesture, she seemed almost like a girl in terms of cuteness. It was just a moment, but she appeared really young.

"What shall we do?"

Being asked in reverse, Sakurai-san also ceased eating and tilted her head.

She also appeared really young, but unlike Okaa-sama, Sakurai-san gave more of an 'Onee-san'-like feel…… although of course, Okaa-sama is far older in terms of age.

"Hm……how about going to see a Ryuukyuu dance?"

Saying so, Sakurai-san turned on the wall mounted display.

Deftly operating the handheld remote, she brought up a guide on Ryuukyuu performances.

"It appears you can also try on the costumes yourself."

"Looks interesting. What do you think, Miyuki-san?"

"I think it also seems pretty nice."

"I'll arrange a car. There is one problem however……"

Seeing both Okaa-sama and I nod, Sakurai-san seemed rather somber.

"The performance is for women only."

Ah, that's true. It certainly did say that at the bottom of the video.

Then, my brother……

"I see……"

Okaa-sama had ripped her toast into small pieces, and was popping them into her mouth one by one.

"……Tatsuya, you can be free for the day."

"Yes."

"You received an invitation to the base from the Captain yesterday right? This would be a good opportunity to visit.

You may be invited to join their training."

"I understand."

You can be free, Okaa-sama had said, but she ended up ordering him after all.

Without showing any dissatisfaction whatsoever, my brother simply accepted it with his deadpan expression.

The same as always.

"Um, Okaa-sama!"

Why I did such a thing, I don't know myself.

"Could I go together with Ni, Nii-san?"

My lips, tongue, and vocal cords ran off and said such a thing. —The reason I stumbled over pronouncing Nii-san was most likely because in my head, I had always been calling him 'brother' or 'that person' all the time.

It's not like I was nervous……or anything.

"Miyuki-san?"

I thought it was pretty abrupt myself. As expected, Okaa-sama was shooting me a rather quizzical look.

Uuu, so uncomfortable……!

"I, uhm, I'm also interested in what sort of training magicians in the military go through, and uh, as a Mistress I think I should find out more about the abilities of my Guardian……"

"Is that so……how admirable."

Saying the word 'mistress' required overcoming considerable amounts of resistance.

In any case, I stood there willing Okaa-sama to believe my desperate excuses.

For some reason, I feel rather guilty……

But, I didn't intend to lie. —Never mind lying or not, I didn't even know my true feelings.

"Tatsuya, it's as you heard. You'll be accompanied by Miyuki-san on your tour of the base."

"Yes."

"Just keep one thing in mind. In public, don't go using honorifics or the like when addressing Miyuki-san. Rather than 'Ojou-sama', just 'Miyuki' is fine. Actions which could lead to the discovery that Miyuki-san is a Yotsuba Head successor are prohibited."

"……Understood."

This time, there was a slight delay before my brother nodded.

It wasn't just my brother who experienced confusion.

I was in a supreme state of embarrassed bewilderment. The part about the 'candidate' went straight over my head, and instead, my mind was filled with scenes where my brother was calling me 'Miyuki'.

"Do not misunderstand. This is only expedient for deceiving any observers who may be watching. There is no change in the relationship between you and Miyuki-san."

At Okaa-sama's words which brought a sense of discomfort, my brother simply replied 'as you command'.

◊ ◊ ◊

Although we're on vacation, our hosts were in the middle of work in a national institution. In order to not be rude and decrease exposure, I wore a UV resistant see-through cardigan over a modest short sleeved dress, while my brother wore a short sleeved polo shirt under his summer jacket with ankle length dress pants when we visited Captain Kazama at the base.

"I am Sanada, in the Defense Army Department of Weapons Development."

The soldier who greeted us when we arrived introduced himself. His rank apparently was Lieutenant. Hearing that, my brother seemed quite surprised.

Why is it……when he's with other people, he shows such a wide variety of expressions?

"Is something the matter?"

"No……it's just I didn't expect to be guided by an officer. Also, I thought that this was an air force base[10]."

Hearing my brother's words, the corners of Sanada-san's mouth twitched. It felt like he had warmed up to us a little.

"It seems you have some familiarity with the military, don't you."

"My martial arts master was once in the army."

"Ahh, I see……well, the reason an army technology officer is in an air force base is because my specialty is rather unique, and we're lacking those

here. The reason your guidance isn't being left to a noncom is……because we were expecting you, I suppose."

Lieutenant Sanada smiled affably as he spoke. He wasn't particularly handsome, but his features had a certain charm which would put anyone at ease.

However for some reason my brother seemed to go on guard upon seeing that smile.

Sanada-san led us into a high-ceiling gymnasium. By gymnasium, I refer to the fact that that's the closest impression I could think of, and it's possible that it has a different name altogether.

From the ceiling which was probably about five stories hung a large number of ropes, from which many soldiers were climbing up to the ceiling then jumping off. They wore no parachutes. It was doubtful whether a parachute would have done any good at this height, but normally speaking fractures would be the least of their problems.

This technique is Acceleration Systematic Magic - Deceleration, is it……

There were probably around 50 people.

All the soldiers getting on then off the ropes were magicians.

The level of this skill wasn't particularly high, but it's extremely unlikely that was all they teach magicians at this base. For so many magicians to be in one regional base……this is truly the frontline border.

I can also see the bad soldier, err, Lance Corporal Higaki.

So that person was a magician……

Captain Kazama was waiting for us. I can understand that he knew we were coming based on him sending Sanada-san to pick us up, but I didn't think he'd go as far as to leave supervision of training to a subordinate while waiting.

No—he hadn't been waiting for 'us', but rather, my brother.

"Coming this early, can I interpret this as an interest in the military?"

With a clumsy smile on his rugged face, Captain Kazama spoke to my brother.

"I do have some interest. However, I have not decided on whether I want to become a soldier."

"Well, that's to be expected. You're still a junior high student right?"

His wording different from yesterday, I felt that he had some ulterior motives—although that may be a bit harsh.

"Just recently."

"You should be around 12, no, 13 right? Though, you're a pretty cool customer."

"I am 13."

At the Captain's question, my brother gave a safe answer. I couldn't help feel a sense of surprise, but I immediately put it down to my misplaced beliefs.

My brother was an honor student at school. Not only in primary, but even in the junior high he had just entered, in everything unrelated to magic he was a prodigy all the way.

He couldn't really be said to be sociable even as flattery, but he's been relied on in numerous situations by both classmates and juniors, and even once by a teacher.

If he had been born into a family unconnected to magic.

If he hadn't been the nephew of the Yotsuba family head.

If he wasn't Okaa-sama's son.

If he wasn't my brother.

…There's no point thinking about this, is there.

It's the same as thinking, what if I didn't have 'Yotsuba' Miya's blood in me.

While I was lost in thought, at some point, it was asked if we'd like to participate in the rope climbing training. Obviously not me, but my brother.

"No, I'm not that good at magic."

Hearing him refer to himself in the first person 'I', my back tingled. Was that a caution from Okaa-sama, to seem normal?

It doesn't really suit him……no wait, that's not the point!

"Um, how did you know about Nii-san?"

Again, that strong aversion when attempting to speak the word 'Nii-san'.

Why?

When it's such an indisputable fact that this person is my brother.

"How did you know he was a magician?"

But seizing up in a place like this would be too unnatural.

More than that, this is important to me.

Normally, my brother does not wear a CAD. Of course, he does not carry traditional aids like charms or vájra either.

Both Okaa-sama and I carried mobile terminal CADs, so over these four days, the only one who conspicuously dressed as and could be told to be a magician should be Sakurai-san.

Don't tell me, we're being observed……?

"……Just somehow, I guess."

Captain Kazama seemed to be surprised at being asked a question by me, and with a serious expression gave a decidedly seemingly not serious answer.

Just somehow, the heck's that?

Is he trying to dodge the question!?

"It's not like I'm trying to hide anything here."

—!?

At that timing, almost as if he'd read my mind, my face stiffened.

"Having seen countless hundreds of mages, it's like I can read the air about them now. Whether they're magicians or not. Whether they're strong or weak."

It's no good, I thought, I can't stop the unrest from showing on my expression.

"By the way, why would you ask such a thing?"

This is bad……!

My sensitive reaction had aroused suspicion.

Even though I had been told by Okaa-sama to keep my relationship with the Yotsuba under wraps.

"I'm sorry, my sister has always been sensitive about my poor magic……she's more nervous than usual."

—To me who had lost my focus and didn't know what to do next, my brother became my shield.

"Is that so. You've a good sister."

"Thank you. She is my pride."

"Haha, you get along so well. I'm jealous."

I could hear only biting sarcasm in his words..

But my brother had no such intentions.

He had only helped me because I had been in trouble.

I'm not so distorted as to not understand that.

But why was he so concerned?

Even though my struggling for a reply was no concern of his as a Guardian.

Even though keeping the secret of the Yotsuba held no benefit for my brother.

Even though it'd only be me who would be scolded.

So why would he cover me as normal siblings would, as a brother protects his sister……?

Chapter 10

November 6th, AD 2095 / Yotsuba Main House - Drawing room

"Still, a far greater enigma than ever expected."

In his conversation with Tatsuya, Kazama dropped a line seemingly without context, yet Miyuki picked it up immediately.

"You understood?"

"Just who do you think I am?"

Tatsuya, bowing lightly with a wry smile, expressed his apologies to Kazama.

"I didn't realise until I had been invited on site……but barring the field hospitals on the front lines, I had seldom sensed the smell of death so densely before."

At Kazama's straightforward evaluation, Miyuki involuntarily raised her eyebrows.

At that likely unconscious change in his sister's expression, Tatsuya thought 'no wonder'.

"That's because this is the site of the infamous 'Fourth Institute'."

"The site of the deathly[11] Magic Ability Development Fourth Institute huh……just looking at the building here now, there's no way to tell."

During the rise of modern magic, just as in other developed countries, many research and development institutions sprang up dealing with magicians. 10 numbered institutes were set up, and now half of them are still operating. The remaining half, as rights for magicians started to pick up, were closed down one by one for inhumane research amongst other reasons.

Amongst even these was the institute whose research was whispered to have disregarded human life and humanity itself, the Fourth Institute of Magician Development, or the 'Fourth Institute'.

Due to the confidentiality surrounding both the Fourth Institute and its research, not even its location had ever been publicly disclosed, only an announcement that it was to be shut down.

The center of the former Fourth Institute was located right in the basement of the Yotsuba main house.

The products of the Fourth Institute, the magicians they developed, were designated only with the number 'Four'—the Yotsuba.

Magicians with the letter four in their family name, aside from the Yotsuba, are known to include the 'Yomo', 'Shihoudou', and 'Watanuki'. But they are unconnected to the Ten Master Houses and the 18 auxiliary houses.

"All their research facilities are in the basement after all. It's not just this house, but all the houses of this village were disguised parts of the Fourth Institute's faculties."

"So it seems. The first time I knew about it three years ago, I was quite shocked as well."

"Well, the ground facilities are still used in order to test a magician's performance, and the martial arts gym especially sees much use…… the smell of death the Major still senses, are most likely now the bodies of the magicians who didn't make the cut."

"And so are the Guardians of the Yotsuba tempered, literally side by side with death. I see, so that's why you people need so little training after joining the military; even the children are formidable."

The first time Miyuki had heard, she had actually blocked her ears.

Now, she is able to face the truth.

But even now, the pain which runs through her chest hasn't disappeared.

She will never be able to get used to this pain.

She herself hoped that the day she can simply accept such pain will never come.

Chapter 11

August 6th, AD 2092 / Okinawa - Onna Air Force base

Soon after our tour had begun, the rope training ended.

After the rope training was grappling. It may have been of interest to those with an affinity for martial arts, but for someone like me who doesn't even grasp the difference between kenpo and karate, I got bored rather quickly.

At this rate, with us simply spectating, there's no way I will be able to grasp my brother's true abilities.

Maybe I could simply excuse myself early…… nope, no good. I'm not supposed to separate myself from my brother, and even if I did then it defeats the purpose of having come here anyway. Not to mention, it would simply be too rude. It'd be good if it's somehow possible to get into a situation where that person joins in the training……

There's no way he could have read my thoughts.

"Shiba-kun, you're pretty bored just watching aren't you? Want to have a go?"

With that invitation from Captain Kazama, that person looked over at me.

"I guess so, we came all this way so why not?"

Just now……the fact that I was bored, did he see through me?

Poof, the blood rushed to my head.

How mean, how mean, how meean!

Why did he have to go notice something he totally didn't need to notice!

—That person didn't so much as crack a smile, yet here you are having such a childish fit, my inner voice of reason admonished.

But my feelings continued to denounce him.

Ni, Nii-san you idiot, you should at least give me a reason to get mad at you!

Even in my monologue, the uncomfortable sense of resistance at calling him 'Nii-san' didn't completely disappear.

In the first place, truthfully speaking, that term would have been a more appropriate term of address for him, or so it should be.

So just why……?

It seems I still don't fully understand my own heart.

The partner called up for my brother was a sergeant of medium build looking to be in his late twenties or early thirties.

"Shiba-kun, there's no need to go easy. Back when he was a student, Sergeant Toguchi's boxing skills were on the nationals level."

Even without magic, he was good enough for nationals?

Sliding on his toes without stepping, closing the distance in small increments, his stance felt more like karate than boxing. I wonder if this is Okinawa's boxing style? Or is it the Air Force's?

While I was distracted by such speculations, the match was over in an instant.

The time it takes to process thought. In that one moment, my brother struck out with his right arm.

That was an image born from results.

What I really saw was my brother somehow suddenly appearing right next to Sergeant Toguchi, with his right arm extended.

The Sergeant collapsed without a sound onto his knees, somehow spared from falling over any further than that.

"Toguchi!"

One of the watching soldiers ran up in a hurry, and proceeded to administer (I think) first aid to the sweating Sergeant.

Still standing where he was, my brother lightly bowed.

Despite his face showing respect for the opponent he had defeated, it also gave off the impression he was somehow flaunting his victory.

"This, this is……"

Next to me, Captain Kazama was muttering. Lieutenant Sanada was speechless, staring with wide eyes.

"Corporal Haebaru!"

"Sir!"

At the Captain's call, a well spirited soldier looking to be in his mid 20s stepped forth.

The man was slimmer than the Sergeant, but there was no impression of frailty whatsoever; he had the image of a knife forged through fire and water, hammered and whetted, until everything unneeded was chipped away and all impurities removed: simply sharp.

"Do not even think of holding back. Go with your full power!"

"Yessir!"

Simultaneous with his answer, Corporal Haebaru pounced on my brother.

That's insane!

There's no way you can match a soldier who has fought on the frontlines against a 13 year old boy!

Intending to shout out 'stop!' I opened my mouth.

But the actual words never came.

Sighs of admiration could be heard coming from here and there from the audience

That person was fending off the Corporal's onslaught without any hint of being in danger.

Punches and kicks sent out at a speed blurry to the eye, were being intercepted at an even greater speed.

Not by a little, but by quite a bit.

"It's like he has fought real battles before. That interval is the space you'd allow in case the opponent is holding something back."

"Seems like it."

I didn't understand even half of the conversation between the Captain and the Lieutenant, but even my untrained eyes could perceive that my brother had the upper hand.

There was no room for mistaking the Corporal's expression.

Even as he attacked, he was desperate.

Ah!

That person counterattacked.

But the Corporal was no slouch either.

After intercepting my brother's punches right, left, right, left, from the now exposed flank, a counter—!?

I almost involuntarily closed my eyes, but a part of myself calmly told me 'there is no need'.

There's no way that person would be taken out by attacks of this caliber, or such.

The moment it seemed that the Corporal had caught hold of my brother, my brother had already slipped past to the Corporal's side.

That person's right hand extended, and grabbed the Corporal's right sleeve near the top of the elbow.

Yanking the Corporal my brother halted his own motion, at the same time turning Corporal Haebaru around so that his side was exposed.

Without a sound, my brother struck out with his right elbow.

With a groan, the Corporal staggered forwards two, three steps.

The Captain's shout of 'that's enough!' was the signal to end.

Now receiving treatment, Corporal Haebaru shook hands with that person, as people crowded around them.

As the praise showered down, the Captain cut in admist the throng.

In the gap left in his wake, I followed after the Captain.

"Winning against Corporal Haebaru is quite the feat. He's one of the strongest in the unit, you know?"

The one who said this was Lieutenant Sanada.

"I truly didn't expect this degree of skill. Did you receive some form of special training?"

Captain Kazama swept over my brother with discerning eyes.

"No, nothing special in that sense. In terms of my strength, there's a dojo at our mother's place, and I train there."

"Hmm……"

While he didn't seem completely satisfied, the Captain nodded, appearing to say 'I won't pry any further for now'.

"But at this rate, the honor of the Onna Airborne Corps will be crushed……will you consent to one more match?"

Instead of prying, the Captain said something rather selfish. The one who had invited my brother to participate was the Captain himself. And yet, now that his men had been defeated he went and said something like 'losing honor'.

Saying that he must have a match in such a selfish way, just how far is this going to go?

I tried to gently refuse the Captain's offer.

Since my brother is my escort, I had the right to refuse. I thought that.

"Please, allow me!"

But I was one step too slow.

Interrupting me, a voice I knew called out. It was a voice I had heard recently.

"Lance Corporal Higaki—if this is for the sake of revenge, I will have to refuse you."

"It is not revenge, it is vindication!"

How is that any different? It's the exact same thing!

Thinking he wasn't such a bad guy, was my mistake.

"Humm……well Shiba-kun, it's as you heard, are you willing to have a match with him? Lance Corporal Higaki is still young, but he's no less experienced than Haebaru."

Refusing such an offer would by no means be unreasonable. There is no benefit to doing this.

"I accept."

Despite my thoughts being so, that person went ahead and consented to the Captain.

Lance Corporal Higaki crouched slightly, raised both hands, and looking extremely observant faced that person.

Despite bending over a bit, the Lance Corporal was still taller than my brother.

It looked like a boy was about to be attacked by a bear—that's what the scene resembled.

Just by looking, it feels like being crushed under pressure.

But that person simply slowly shifted from left to right, balancing on the left foot then the right, watching impassively at his opponent who was waiting for a chance.

That volatile atmosphere under which it was difficult to breath, did not continue for very long.

Lance Corporal Higaki's body seemed to swell for a moment.

The next instant, the Lance Corporal's body turned into a cannonball and tore towards my brother.

So fast……!

With a huge leap my brother dodged the charge, but his stance collapsed.

Fast as lightning, the Lance Corporal struck again.

Rolling along the floor, that person somehow managed to dodge the tackle.

I was absolutely stunned at Lance Corporal Higaki's speed. But there was no way that even this would make a successor candidate to one of the Ten Master Houses, the Yotsuba, show an expression of surprise.

"Using magic, isn't that utterly cowardly!?"

I lashed out at Captain Kazama.

Not even I had noticed when he turned on the switch to his CAD. It had been well disguised. But the fact that he was using magic itself, was not something which could be hidden.

The Lance Corporal's speed right now, is being driven by self-acceleration magic!

At my protest, Captain Kazama simply turned his head and looked at me.

The answer came from the direction the Captain was still half turned towards.

"That's enough, Miyuki!"

My brother's words, were a double shock to me.

My brother, had given me an order.

My brother, had called me 'Miyuki'.

"There had never been a rule that the use of magic was not allowed."

My brother flatly asserted so.

Addressing me without a title, calling me Miyuki without honorifics, though it was all according to Okaa-sama's instructions, the decision to reprove me itself was completely my brother's decision.

My brother, of his own will, rebuked my wishful thinking.

At that, rather than feeling anger or resistance, a strange numb, tingling sensation was born inside my heart.

"Higaki, close in with care!"

Next to me, now that I had fallen silent, Captain Kazama threw out commands.

As if I had just awoken, I noticed.

The air surrounding my brother, had changed color.

It felt like the light was dimming.

It was obviously an illusion.

My brother was exerting such pressure that an onlooker would have their visual field constricted.

My brother changed his stance.

His right palm facing the opponent, he extended his right arm straight out.

His left hand supported his right elbow.

Is this, the position for my brother's non-systematic magic……?

The muscles of Lance Corporal Higaki's whole body seemed to swell again.

This time, right at the moment my brother should have dived out of the way with both feet—at that instant.

From my brother's right hand, a torrent of psions poured forth.

The psion wave swept through Lance Corporal Higaki's body, and as they did his charge slowed with a snap.

This is……! Gram Demolition!

The raging storm of psion particles forcibly overwhelmed the self-acceleration magic applied to the body, and at the same time shook the connections between the mind and the body. Against a person skilled enough to control his body not through electrical nervous impulses but rather directly through his consciousness, the barrage of external foreign psions wrecked even greater havoc.

It was almost like, Lance Corporal Higaki had forgotten how to tackle.

As the Lance Corporal threw himself defencelessly at my brother, my brother simply moved aside and dealt one blow.

His bulky body, spinning around once, was blown away in an almost comedic fashion.

My brother walked over to the side of Lance Corporal Higaki, sprawled out on the ground looking at the ceiling.

The Lance Corporal simply lay there with his large chest heaving up and down, showing no sign of rising.

Holding out his right hand, my brother was expressionless.

After just a moment's hesitation, the Lance Corporal took that hand with a grin.

He pulled on my brother's hand.

Don't tell me, a trap!?

That was just me thinking too much.

Despite their difference in body weight, Lance Corporal Higaki was able to pull himself up and stand without dragging my brother to the ground.

"—It's my loss. Utterly. I understand well now that incident the day before yesterday wasn't just me being caught off guard."

He wasn't speaking in such a loud voice, but for some reason I could hear Lance Corporal Higaki's words clearly.

"Allow me to introduce myself again. I am Lance Corporal Joseph Higaki, Onna Airborne, Sakishima Air Defense Corps, of the National Air Force in Okinawa. Will you tell me your name?"

"I am Shiba Tatsuya."

"OK, Tatsuya. Just call me Joe. Do you still have a while in Okinawa?

If you're ever bored, give me a call. Although I may not look like it, I know quite a few people around here."

"That's enough, Joe. We're still in the middle of training."

Captain Kazama called out while laughing, and reacting as if shocked, Lance Corporal Higaki stood to attention.

Hmm…… so he's a subordinate who's treated rather affectionately. I suppose that means he's trusted……?

Having to change my opinion of this guy over and over is starting to become painful.

In the first place it's not like he's someone I'm liable to meet with often, and since he's someone I'm not likely to see again it shouldn't really matter to me what kind of guy he is.

"I'm sorry for having asked so much of you. Because of it, it seems like some of my subordinates have had it rather rough as well. Will you accompany us for tea? I'd also like to inquire about that 'tooate'[12] just now."

Tooate, is probably referring to my brother's non-systematic magic.

My feeling of unease went up greatly, but it was impossible to refuse such an invitation in this situation.

"So, that psion wave really was Gram Demolition?"

"Was that really all? I believe there was also some continental Ancient magic, 'Tendan' in there as well."

While technically they had invited us to tea, what was served instead was coffee.

Sitting on one side are my brother and I.

On the other side are Captain Kazama and Lieutenant Sanada.

A coffee break with four people.

Somehow, the atmosphere feels a little strange.

Captain Kazama is talking with my brother.

Lieutenant Sanada is also talking with my brother.

As that person's little sister, I simply sat in the background as per my instructions.

Here my brother is the protagonist, and I'm just an accessory.

"—From what I've seen, Shiba-kun, you don't carry a CAD around right?"

When they say the name Shiba, they're referring to my brother. I am 'Shiba-kun's little sister'.

"What are you using as an aid?"

This is my first time experiencing such a thing.

It's weird, yet not uncomfortable.

"I do use a specialised CAD, but generally speaking it doesn't really have the right feeling……I'm bad with magic that requires a CAD to cast, after all."

"Ohh, I see. If you're so comfortable with manipulating psions like that already though, I don't see how using CADs could possibly present a problem for you."

The topic has already shifted from my brother's non-systematic magic to his CAD.

"Shiba-kun, would you like to try the CAD I'm developing?"

"Lieutenant Sanada develops CADs?"

"My job is the development of magic equipment in general, including CADs. This one in particular is a prototype CAD featuring cartridges as storage."

I had the sudden feeling that my brother's eyes were shining. It was a fairly modest reaction in comparison to most people, but for my brother to show so much interest in something was extremely unusual already.

"I would like to."

This is probably the very first time, I've seen him express his desire so clearly.

We were taken to a place I don't think was in the base, a clean and tidy laboratory.

For me, who had been certain that military bases were all dirty, drab places, I was not quite able to contain my feelings of surprise. The faint smiles Captain Kazama and Lieutenant Sanada wore when they looked over at me was most likely because of that.

My brother looked around in admiration, or impression.

It feels like today, I'm seeing many sides of this person for the first time.

However as much as I had thought that this person was indifferent to everything, even he must have things he's interested in……

I wonder then, just what does he think of me?

That question, was suddenly floating in my mind.

The answer came automatically.

Desperately, I fought against the shaking which threatened to wrack my body, stiffening myself as much as I could.

"……Miyuki, are you feeling unwell?"

My body, so so close to trembling, suddenly stopped at the sound of my brother's voice. Not only my body, even my heart almost stopped. The moment he called my name, Miyuki, had felt like he was answering the question I had been asking myself. Like he was coldly, indifferently affirming the answer I already had in my heart.

But my brother's voice didn't seem cold—for some reason it felt like it was filled with compassion.

"—No, I'm fine. I guess I'm just a little tired. If I sit down a while, I'm sure I'll recover in no time. Is it alright if I go sit in that chair over there?"

Asking the Captain, I was allowed to sit down on a chair by the wall.

Now separated from my brother's side, I felt a little better.

My brother was holding a large pistol shaped CAD, and being instructed by Lieutenant Sanada.

At the sight of my brother my earlier doubts reared their ugly heads again, ballooning, and I leaned heavily back.

No matter how much I shake and shake, I cannot erase them from my consciousness.

Just what does my brother, think of me……?

I have no confidence it's love.

There's no way it could be favour.

It may be simply, that I'm hated.

If I didn't exist, if only I didn't exist, my brother the honor student, the elite athlete, possibly soon a full-fledged military magician, could live his own life.

Yet, right now, looking away from my brother, as if letting go of his hand, as if being shaken off, was something infinitely scarier.

"—The device has acceleration and movement compound sequences inbuilt, giving the 7.62mm bullets a maximum range of 16 km—"

"—That's amazing. Still, the actual practicalities—"

Now holding a large-caliber rifle CAD and chatting away happily, my brother's voice came across incoherently.

In the same room, unable to shut my eyes or block my ears, I was forced to bear the haunting dark clouds misting my mind in silence.

A thought drifted by the back of my head, wishing this would all end soon.

All the while, to prevent my selfishness from appearing in my expression, I maintained a hollow pokerface as hard as I could.

Chapter 12

November 6th, AD 2095 / Yotsuba Main House - Drawing room

Upon the sound of more knocking at the door, Miyuki turned around.

"Merely being a Yotsuba Guardian isn't anything special. My own conceit was abruptly brought to a close by Yanagi-san, and I'm still unable to win against my master yet."

Tatsuya and Kazama continued the story Miyuki was remembering.

"I don't believe you held any conceit from the beginning. Also, I'm unable to win against him either as well."

It seems Miyuki had only been spacing out for a short period of time.

Still, to her, it felt like she had recalled a great many things.

The knocking came again, stronger this time.

When Miyuki let them in, with a polished 'excuse me' a young butler entered.

Rather than young, he was more simply still a youth. He did not seem to be much different in age from Tatsuya.

Despite that, not allowing a hint of irritation or impatience to show on his face, he was well trained indeed.

"I am very sorry."

All of a sudden, the youth began to apologise.

"The business with our earlier associate is rather prolonged……could you please wait just a while longer, my lady requests."

My lady, refers to Yotsuba Maya.

She has never married. The term 'my lady' is therefore technically incorrect, but neither Miyuki, Kazama, or Tatsuya possess correcting conventional nomenclature as a hobby.

For that matter, even if they did, for the sake of politeness supplying a more accurate term was out of the question.

"It is not a problem."

Querying Miyuki and Tatsuya visually, Kazama answered the youth's request.

"Thank you very much."

The youth did not bother verifying Tatsuya and Miyuki's consent.

Setting aside Tatsuya, not even asking Miyuki, was probably because as a relative Miyuki was considered one of the Yotsuba.

That is not incorrect.

Tatsuya did not for a moment consider himself a Yotsuba, but the same cannot be said for Miyuki.

As much as she is able to reject being the eldest daughter of Shiba Tatsurou, she cannot reject being the daughter of Shiba Miya.

Therefore she, against her own desires, cannot reject being the niece of Yotsuba Maya.

Chapter 13

August 8th, AD 2092 / Okinawa - Vacation House

From the first day, the Okinawa vacation had had a turbulent atmosphere. Yesterday, tranquility had been recovered. Right now on this day, time is also passing quietly.

Although you could call a boring summer vacation a problem, I would not want to endure a vacation where I was so worn out from difficulties.

At last, after our arrival in Okinawa on the fourth, we were able to enjoy our holiday in the South to the fullest.

However, I had doubt that Ani was included in 'we'.

The current time is 1:00 pm. Instead of taking an afternoon nap right now, I am reading in my room. Sakurai-san found a rare paper magic textbook for me and I am indolently viewing it at my desk.

—It is good to be indolent. After all, I probably would be unable to understand all of it anyway.

Only the most technical volumes on magic are printed on paper, and even high school students have trouble getting a hold of them; it would be the height of hubris to think that I, a mere middle school student, could understand it by only reading it once.

However, that person just might be able to do it.

I received the impression that that person, in short Ani, had in his own room a workstation where he had been enthusiastically typing something related to CADs on his keyboard.

The CADs were the two gun shaped ones he had received from Lieutenant Sanada the day before yesterday.

At first, they used the word 'lend' as they talked, but in no time, it became 'give'. I felt like there was a cross examination over "Is this okay? Doesn't it belong to the national defense force?" ……He said it was an investment for the future, and it was not the case that I could not understand what he was anticipating. However, unfortunately, his investment is predetermined to be a total loss. Because that person is my 'Guardian', he will never be any kind of soldier.

That is no reason to refuse what can be called a gift however, it is only a prototype after all. There is no way it has any meaning beyond a souvenir given to a visitor that has a promising future.

Now that I think of it, that person seemed to really like receiving this present.

The day before yesterday, yesterday, and today, he fiddled with the CAD system whenever he had free time. —Is he able to do some kind of CAD tuning? I have never seen him do it. Still, until now he has never shown me his combat practice either. The reason for that might be because he had no free time to rest.

I wonder if he has lost interest in it?

Could fiddling with a CAD really be very interesting?

Well, even if you call it tuning, he is probably only at the level of using switches at assigned levels. However…….

Before I realized it, I was already standing in front of the door of that person's room.

Umm, what did I come here for?

I probably want something, right.

In my confused state of mind, my left hand that was raised in order to knock on the door seemed like it belonged to someone else.

Due to my confused state of mind, my left hand froze on the brink of knocking on the door.

Somehow I feel as if I am playing the part of a buffoon without an audience for my antics. Even worse, a third rate buffoon.

I sighed and lowered my hand.

At that moment, I was about to turn on my heel and leave, however, I was a little too late.

The outward swinging door opened with a soft clink.

The door was opened in a way that took in consideration the fact that there might be someone standing in front of it. Thanks to that I did not end up

with my nose struck by the door like a character in a poorly written slapstick comedy skit, but I had no leisure to put up a pretense and flee.

"Do you need something?"

Ani was acting as if he knew I had been standing there — in essence, now he knows it is right, but — he asked that upon showing his face.

"Uh, umm, er….."

"Yes."

Ani is waiting patiently on a reply from my incoherent self.

Although I call it waiting, it cannot be discerned from his poker face. Still, he is watching me.

Ani's composed gaze increased my bewilderment.

"Er, is it alright if I come in?"

In this situation, I had, unfortunately, become a bit hysterical; that is to say, I was overcome by a sense of peril. Before I was completely overwhelmed, I regrettably tried to forcibly terminate it. After I carelessly spoke, I thought 'what are you going to do after you enter the room!?' However, that was way too late.

At that time, my face had probably turned red. Red faced and scowling — although I never intended to be glowering at him, but — in response to me who was staring at him fixedly, that person naturally widened his eyes but displayed no other sign of disturbance. He pushed the door away and invited me inside.

As usual his room was plain — that is to say there were not many things in it.

Within that deserted interior, the functional workstation made its presence known with a loud voice.

"Now, what exactly do you need?"

I could not answer Ani's question.

At that time, my consciousness was drawn to the blatant code displayed at the workstation that was connected to a half dissected CAD. The monitor was crammed with an enumeration of numbers and letters.

Doesn't this room look just like a CAD development lab……

To be honest, I lost my nerve.

However, the next word Ani spoke swiftly drew my consciousness back to him.

"Ojou-sama."

"Don't call me Ojou-sama."

In response to me who had yelled, Ani froze in surprise.

For this person to look like he was at a loss for words is really unusual, but I do not think it was strange.

After all,

My voice just now was like a wail.

The voice sounded as if I was about to burst into tears.

"Uh….."

"……."

"Um, er…..that's right! If you do not get accustomed to speaking to me normally now, you might slip up unexpectedly later on at somewhere else, right?"

Ani's expression switched from 'surprise' to 'suspicion'.

The mistrust in his gaze crushed me, but I whipped out a really bad excuse through sheer willpower.

"So please call me, Mi-Miyuki!"

However, that was as far as I could go.

When at last I finished speaking, that was my only thought as I squeezed my eyes shut.

Like a child afraid to be scolded, I grasped at the ploy of closing my eyes and bowing my head.

Although I did not know what I feared, I was indeed like a child who unconditionally feared a parent's disapproval.

"…..Got it, Miyuki. Is that all?"

Ani's reply was gentle.

It was not his usual adult like formality; he spoke casually as if he was speaking to a friend.

Ani probably spoke to people other than me like school friends and underclassmen in that tone of voice and informal language.

Ani was gazing at me with gentle eyes while speaking to me in a gentle manner.

"…..That is all."

I am indeed about to burst into tears this time.

It is all I can do to hold back my tears.

"Excuse me, I am going back to my room"

Since I did not have the endurance to do it for long, I escaped Ani's presence.

Taking refuge in my own room, I buried my face in a pillow.

After all, I had unfortunately been aware of it.

That gentleness had only been an act.

Even the casual words that a brother would naturally direct toward his sister in a normal sibling relationship were only the output that came from cold calculation.

I had no evidence to back my unfortunate conclusion.

But, since I am that person's sister.....

It is only at these times that I can feel the bitterness of communicating through the bonds of siblings as I try to kill the sound of my weeping.

Chapter 14

August 11th, AD 2092 / Okinawa - Airforce base ~ Villa

The two days after that passed by normally.

That person followed me around as always, and I treated him the same as always.

I thought I'd try being nicer to my brother. —No, I still think so.

I thought that if I did so, something might be changed.

But it only served as a constant reminder that habits, once ingrained, cannot be so easily corrected.

Yesterday, and the day before, I again as always, treated him selfishly. There are seven days left of our two week vacation. In those seven days, I will most likely treat him the same again and again. I cannot overcome myself.

……If it were one week ago, I wouldn't even have noticed.

Just what is happening to me?

I don't understand myself. I don't understand what it is I desire.

In a state of melancholy, I supposed I had to pass this day as well with such thoughts clouding my mind.

But, happily — saying so may be far too impudent, yet it seemed that would no longer be the case — I no longer have the luxury of such thoughts.

Just as I was finishing breakfast, emergency alerts started blaring from all the devices and equipment around.

The ones issuing the alarm were the armed forces.

In other words, an attack by a foreign power.

I stared intently at the screen, as if to devour it.

"An invasion is underway from the West sea."

"There has been no declaration of war."

"The attack force is a fleet of ballistic missile submarines."

"Currently, they are semi-submerged and are attacking the Kerama Islands."

At that flood of unfamiliar words, panic threatened to overwhelm me. The only words which stuck were 'ballistic missile submarine'. Was the submarine we encountered on our cruise a harbinger of this event?

"Please allow me to convey this to Maya-sama as soon as possible!"

Sakurai-san could not hide her impatience as she made her request.

"Yes, please do."

And as she nodded, neither could Okaa-sama hide her nervousness.

I thought, no wonder.

I myself certainly hadn't considered that we'd suddenly find ourselves in the middle of a war with no warning.

The TV anchor from earlier was making repeated calls for everyone to 'please stay calm', although he himself didn't exactly look like a figure of composure either.

Of course. Saying something like 'don't panic' in a situation like this is far more ludicrous.

The reason I wasn't truly panicking was because I simply didn't have that sense of reality. I think I saw everything as if it were someone else's problem, and kept myself in a sort of escapism.

But……what about this person?

My brother, reading in silence from a small terminal rapidly scrolling with data far more detailed than the TV reports, seemed to have misplaced his human emotions such as agitation and tension elsewhere.

In a calm atmosphere, seeming as if considering all this a mere intellectual exercise, if someone had called him a complex android I might have even been inclined to agree with them.

Does my brother not feel that this is really happening, the same as me?

Or does he really, simply not feel anything at all?

As I stared, my brother made an 'oh?' face.

Just as I was thinking "what is it?", my brother took a communication terminal out from the breast pocket of his summer jacket.

"Yes, this is Shiba……no, I should be thanking you for the other day……to the base, you say?"

From his response, I guessed that the ones on the line must be our recent acquaintances from the Defense Forces, the Captain and his squad. But the base should be in a state of war at the moment, what could it possibly be?

"I appreciate the offer, but……no……yes, I'll try talking with my mother……alright, I'll contact you later."

As he finished the call, it was no longer just me staring at my brother.

Turning to Okaa-sama who was seated on the couch, my brother stood up and bowed.

"Madam."

Facing his real mother, that person addressed her so.

Why, at such a time, does that pain come back to me, as if it was squeezing my heart?

This pain which I had never felt before one week ago.

"We have received an offer from Captain Kazama at Onna Air Force base, to shelter in the base."

"Eh!?"

Involuntarily, I let out a sound.

He's only met us twice, and only one of them really counts as a meeting, so why……?

Unbelievable things were piling up one after the other such that my emotions were almost saturated, but the surprises didn't stop there.

"Madam."

Sakurai-san held out a cordless voice communication unit, a so called 'handset'.

"It's a call from Maya-sama."

This time not even an 'eh' came out.

A call from Aunt?

To Okaa-sama?

Okaa-sama and Aunt are twins, and generally speaking it's not too unusual for them to converse, but……it is an open secret amongst the Yotsuba that Okaa-sama and Aunt don't really get along well.

They don't openly come to blows, but their relationship is somewhat like the Cold War.

Which was why just earlier, without even Okaa-sama contacting her……

Before my eyes, a different sort of nervousness appearing on her face, Okaa-sama took the headset.

"Hello, Maya? ……Yes, it's me. ……I see. I guess you've been using your influence…… But, wouldn't moving be dangerous? ……I suppose……alright. Thanks."

After she finished talking, Okaa-sama handed the headset back to Sakurai-san.

"Madam. What did Maya-sama have to say?"

Taking the headset, Sakurai-san asked that natural question.

"She has arranged for us to shelter with the Defense Forces."

"Then, the call Tatsuya-kun received just now."

"That would be it, it seems."

"But, wouldn't moving be dangerous?"

"That's what I said, but,"

……Why? Wouldn't a military shelter be sturdier and safer than a private one?

"Although we are not in an official state of hostilities, against an opponent who would launch a surprise attack like this, expecting them to comply with all the rules of war would be too much of a leap of faith."

"That……I guess so……"

Seeing Okaa-sama and Sakurai-san, then my brother's grim expression, it's like I'm the only one who doesn't understand the situation. Asking them to explain everything bit by bit would be demeaning however……I guess I'll just keep quiet for now.

"Although it wouldn't have been too difficult, she did make the effort, so let's try doing as Maya says. Tatsuya."

"Yes."

My brother, who had been left standing all the while, reacted with a snap. ……Since the person himself wasn't making a dissatisfied face, surely there was no reason for me to be feeling this.

"Contact the Captain and tell him, we accept. Also, request a pickup if possible."

"Certainly."

It almost seemed to me as if everything petty was being pushed onto my brother, but, I'm sure that was just me overthinking things.

Somehow, I had predicted this.

The soldier who came to take us to the base, was none other than Lance Corporal Joseph Higaki.

"Tatsuya, sorry to keep ya waiting!"

"Joe, thanks for coming all this way."

"C'mon man, there's no need to be so formal."

Lance Corporal Higaki gave a bright cheerful smile.

My brother in contrast looked slightly reserved, but was still far more expressive than usual.

No matter how you look at it, the attitude he directed to this Lance Corporal whom we had just recently met was far friendlier than that he ever had towards our family.

Okaa-sama's furrowed brow was no doubt in disapproval towards this rude behavior.

It couldn't possibly be that she was displeased that my brother would open up more to others than his own relatives right?

Whether noticing Okaa-sama's displeased expression, or Sakurai-san's impatient manner, Lance Corporal Higaki stowed the familiar attitude and, snapping to attention, gave a salute.

"By order of Captain Kazama, I am here to pick you up!"

"Thank you for your efforts. Please take us there."

"Ma'am!"

As the Lance Corporal delivered his message in a somewhat more enthusiastic manner than strictly necessary, Sakurai-san replied with a bit of a wince.

Lance Corporal Higaki showed no sign of noticing.

……Truth be told I had wished I were more worried earlier, but now I was able to at least understand a bit better why they were concerned about getting to the base.

The roads were flooded with evacuating civilians, the blaring of the stuck military vehicle's horn lost amidst the crucible of chaos — was a scene I didn't see.

As if the island were quietly holding its breath, the only vehicles on the roads were dark toned military ones.

The atmosphere, rather than a state of alarm, seemed more like a state of martial law. —Although I've only ever seen both in videos before, so I don't exactly know the truth.

Riding in a Defense Forces car, without once being stopped at a checkpoint, without once coming under attack from an enemy, we reached the base uneventfully.

An hour had already passed since the attack began, and despite being taken by complete surprise by the yet unidentified enemy, the Navy and Air Force seemed to be managing to hold them off at the shore.

Unless you had intel from the actual island in question, you'd have no way of knowing anything was actually happening and simply have to take the military's word for it.

Surprisingly, we weren't the only civilians who had been evacuated to the base.

Although it wasn't quite in the hundreds, the number of people here seemed pretty close.

In addition to us, five other civilians had been guided to this underground shelter.

It's none of my business, but I can't help wondering that considering the threat of enemy attack, is it really okay to invite such a large number of unrelated and useless people?

Perhaps, even we—even I, will end up having to fight.

I cannot just rely on Sakurai-san. Okaa-sama was seated on a couch, still recovering. And it will be Sakurai-san's duty to defend her.

Until today I have never had the experience of battle, but my combat magic abilities have been judged to be no less than those of a grown magician.

That was Sakurai-san's judgement, so it's reliable enough.

Yet that alone wasn't enough to dispel my anxieties, and I glanced over subtly at the neighboring seat.

My brother had sat down on the chair next to mine.

Normally he'd always stand just a bit aside or behind me, but now we were sitting next to each other so as to not draw any attention.

In his breast pocket, two CADs were hidden and ready for use at any time.

I'm unsure if this person has anything which could be considered 'combat experience' either, but unlike me, he has plenty of experience killing people.

It wasn't some paltry number like five or ten either.

I had not verified such scenes with my own eyes, but since there's no benefit in lying to me about it, it's definitely the truth.

In support of that experience, my brother maintained perfect composure.

His eyes didn't wander nervously, nor did his body tremble.

Looking at my brother, my anxiety melted away just a little.

Once more……thinking that, I looked over again.

For some reason, our eyes met.

Eh? Eh? Wha? Why?

"Are you alright, Miyuki?"

……!

As agreed three days ago, that person called me 'Miyuki'.

Unlike that time, not pretend-friendly, but a soft, gentle voice.

"I'm right here."

……That's, cheating……!

I don't know what expression I should make.

I don't know what expression I'm making right now.

Hey! Get a grip me! This is just the suspension bridge effect![13] Like a horror house! Stockholm syndrome…

…Is somewhat different from this situation, but anyway, it's all in my head!

Seriously, now of all times, hitting on your actual sister is way too inappropriate!

He himself probably had no such intention, but that's totally irrelevant, no rather, that's just infuriating!

I glared at my brother.

Doing so, my brother abruptly rose from his chair.

Eh? Was I really, making such an unpleasant face?

—Actually, as if not allowing my idealistic naivety to proceed any further, events were proceeding at a rapid pace. I found that out soon enough.

◊ ◊ ◊

It wasn't just my brother who had suddenly stood up.

One breath later, Sakurai-san also knocked aside her chair.

The strangers seated with us, wearing startled expressions, stared at Sakurai-san and that person.

"Tatsuya-kun, that was……"

"Sakurai-san, you heard it as well?"

"Then, there really were gunshots……!"

"It wasn't a pistol but full auto, probably an assault rifle."

……Eh? That means, the enemy is here!?

Why?

Isn't this place right in the heart of a military base?

"Do you know the situation?"

"No, from here is……the walls of this room appear to block magic."

"Yes……it seems, a traditional barrier magic has been erected. Not just this room, but the entire building has been covered to prevent magical reconnaissance."

"We can still use magic just fine within the room however."

Sakurai-san showed agreement to my brother's words.

I had had no idea……

"Hey, y-you guys are magicians?"

Unexpectedly, a man sitting a little apart from us called out to Sakurai-san and my brother. He wore well cut clothes, and appeared to be a man of status. The ones sitting with him were likely his family.

"Yes?"

At that sudden voice, Sakurai-san answered in a dubious tone. The man continued in a rather pompous manner, although I think it was mainly bravado.

"Then, have a look at what's going on."

……The heck?

It's like he's talking to some employees.

That's so……!

"……We are unaffiliated with the base."

Sakurai-san also replied in an offended tone.

Under duress it seems one's true nature shows itself, but there is no obligation to engage with total strangers, especially ones who hold no interest to you, she was probably thinking.

However, Sakurai-san's natural point was lost on this man.

"That's irrelevant. You lot are magicians right?"

"Yes, I said we were."

This man wasn't even listening to Sakurai-san's words.

"Then isn't it your natural obligation to serve humans?"

……!

No way, for people to still say such things with such cold conviction……

Not to mention, right to a magician's face……!

"Did you really mean that?"

Menace crept into Sakurai-san's voice. Her eyes were already narrowed.

Even that man flinched slightly, but his rant didn't stop.

"I-In the first place, magicians are 'things' created to serve 'people'. So it shouldn't matter whether you're military or not."

My shock and anger were too strong for words.

This man had just uttered the unspeakable.

But the sad truth is, there are still numerous non-magicians who think such things.

"I see, yet even assuming that we are indeed created existences."

Replying in my place was my brother who had until now let Sakurai-san do the speaking.

His tone was neither upset nor angry, but merely cold and cynical.

"We are under no obligation to serve you."

"Wha!?"

"Magicians, as existences who serve society and public order, are not required to follow the whims of one unknown individual."

To serve society and public order is a phrase in the 'Charter of the International Association of Magic' well known even to non-magicians. Of course, this man likely knows it as well.

"Y-You impertinent child!"

Hence this reaction.

That man yelled red faced at my brother.

Looking at my brother's eyes, they were filled with contempt and pity.

"Honestly……as an adult, aren't you ashamed to act like that in front of your children?"

Although they had used the same word 'child', the meaning was completely different.

The unknown man looked back at his family with a start.

His family was looking back at him.

His own children, seeing his childish outburst, stared at him in contempt.

To the trembling man's back, my brother delivered the coup de grâce.

"You seem to be misunderstanding something……in this country, more than 80% of magicians came about through lineage and ancestry. Even including partial treatment, the number of biologically 'made' magicians does not even reach 20%."

"Tatsuya."

Bringing matters to a close was Okaa-sama. She most likely didn't have any such intentions though.

Speaking in a languid voice from the sofa, Okaa-sama called my brother's name. My brother took his eyes off the trembling man's back.

"What is it?"

"Go see and report on the situation outside."

As usual, my mother gave instructions in an indifferent tone.

But unusually, my brother frowned.

"……More so than knowing the situation outside is the possibility that harm may befall you in here. In my current state, I cannot protect Miyuki from a remote location."

"Miyuki?"

In a cold voice, Okaa-sama cut through my brother's objections. Her eyes, frigid, narrowed.

"Tatsuya, do you remember your place?"

Only her tone remained courteous; her voice trembled along with her back. My brother called me Miyuki, because I had wished it. Yet hearing Okaa-sama's soft imperative voice, I couldn't even speak up in his defense.

"—My apologies."

My brother apologised with a word, and didn't speak up any more.

"……Tatsuya-kun, leave this place to me."

Breaking into that awkward atmosphere, Sakurai-san spoke up.

Losing interest, Okaa-sama looked away.

"Understood. I'm going."

Bowing in Okaa-sama's direction, he left the room.

Neither my brother, nor Okaa-sama, so much as spared one glance at the man's family as they looked on with frightened eyes.

I can hear sounds like firecrackers coming from outside.

Of course, there's no way they're having a festival out there.

The sound of shooting is audible even to me now.

And it's not just gunshots which are getting closer.

A number of footsteps approached the room, and stopped outside.

Sakurai-san stepped in front of Okaa-sama and me.

Her bracelet CAD was charged with psions, ready to deploy magic immediately.

It's difficult to maintain a ready state for a prolonged period of time like this; Sakurai-san's technique really is quite something.

I can only see her back, but she was probably glaring sharply at the door.

"Excuse me! I am PFC Kinjou, Airborne second squad!"

Although maintaining her alert state, I could tell Sakurai-san's tension decreased slightly. I was also relieved to hear voices on the other side of the door.

It seems like they're soldiers from the base.

Standing behind the door when it opened were four young soldiers. They all seemed to be second generation Left Bloods, but I wasn't particularly concerned. It was just the nature of the base's locality.

Their machine guns being tinged with heat was probably a result of rushing here whilst exchanging gunfire with the enemy.

"We are here to take you to an underground shelter. Everyone, please follow us."

They were expected words, yet I hesitated. If I leave now, I'll become separated from my brother.

"I'm sorry, but one of us went out to see the situation outside."

Before I could speak, Sakurai-san talked to PFC Kinjou.

Sure enough, the PFC frowned.

"But enemy forces have penetrated deep inside the base. It's dangerous to remain here."

To some extent, this was expected as well.

"Then, please feel free to take just those people along for now."

However, Okaa-sama's words were completely unexpected.

"I will not simply abandon my son."

Sakurai-san and I exchanged a silent glance.

Although her words are completely natural if you think about it, a sense of discomfort remained.

"But……"

"You, Kinjou-kun was it. Please go ahead and take those people along, we will remain here."

The man from earlier came forwards to see what was going on, and the four soldiers, now looking grim, began talking to each other in undertones.

"……About Tatsuya-kun, couldn't we contact Captain Kazama later and get him to meet up with us?"

In that gap, Sakurai-san spoke to Okaa-sama in a low voice.

"I'm not worried about Tatsuya. That was just for face."

Okaa-sama's reply was returned under her breath.

I was forced to spend great effort to prevent my knees from knocking together.

Why does Okaa-sama, to her true son, act so indifferently……?

"Then why?"

"Intuition."

"Intuition, you say?"

"Yes. Intuition that these people are not to be trusted."

In an instant, Sakurai-san's alertness flared to the max.

I also forgot all my grievances.

Setting her apart from others, earning her the name 'Mistress of Lethe'(Ruler of the River of Oblivion), Okaa-sama's 'intuition'.

Okaa-sama's specialty magic lies not in perception nor prediction magic, but is a mental interference magic, and as 'mental' magic users are hypothesised to be closely linked with the 'Akashic Record', they possess exceedingly insightful intuition……although there are exceptions, such as me.

At that time, the four soldiers also finished their consultation.

"We are very sorry, but we cannot leave you in this room. Please act responsibly, and come with us."

The words were the same as before.

But, the feeling that their attitude has suddenly become threatening, is surely just my preconception right?

"Dick!"

A new character brought rapid developments to the scene.

PFC Kinjou, upon hearing that voice, immediately opened fire on the speaker, Lance Corporal Higaki.

There are no windows in the corridor walls so I cannot tell if he was hit, but it was certain that the voice just now had been Lance Corporal Higaki, and it was also certain that PFC Kinjou had been firing at him.

The man's family began to scream.

PFC Kinjou's companions advanced into the room, their muzzles aimed.

Sakurai-san immediately began an activation sequence, but a 'noise' suddenly filled my head, like scratching glass, and the magic formula's construction faltered.

This is, a Psion wave? Cast Jamming!?

Holding my ears and turning around, I saw that one of the four wore a brass ring.

Okaa-sama was clutching her chest and slumping over!

This is bad……!

From the start, Okaa-sama had extreme sensitivity to Psions. In addition, she was no longer young, and her Psion wave resistance had fallen as of late.

The Psion waves from Cast Jamming now adversely affected her body as well.

I have to stop it!

"Dick! Al! Mark! Ben! Why?"

My palms still held to my ears, I heard Lance Corporal Higaki's voice faintly.

Thank goodness, so he wasn't hit……

"Why are you betraying us?!"

"Joe, rather, why are you so loyal to Japan!"

Between single shots—so machine guns can fire single shots as well I thought, although honestly I could care less right now—PFC Kinjou bellowed in return.

"Have you lost it, Dick! Isn't Japan our homeland!"

"Look at how Japan has treated us! Even though we joined the army, even though we worked for the sake of Japan, we're still just 'Left Bloods' to them! We're outsiders, no matter how much time passes!"

"You're wrong! Dick, that's just what you think! Our parents were unquestionably foreigners. Compared to the guys who have lived here for generations, it's natural for them to treat us a bit like strangers! And yet the military! The unit! Our superiors and our comrades, treat us as brothers! Accepted us as friends!"

"Joe, that's because you're a magician! Because they see value in you, the military guys show you a good face!"

"Dick, are you really saying such a thing? Are you really saying that as a Left Blood you're treated as an outsider, and as a magician I live a separate existence from you guys? Am I not your comrade, Dick!"

The sound of gunshots faltered.

And, the Cast Jamming Psion wave weakened.

A chance!

Judging from this instability, the Antinite user is a non-magician without a magic field. Just because you're pushing a bunch of Psions, and are using a general form of Cast Jamming you can't even control properly, thinking you can keep me, the candidate for the next Yotsuba head, down forever is a big mistake!

I cannot use a CAD. The time taken to initiate an activation sequence would be too much.

The only magic I can use then, is that.

The mental interference magic I inherited from Okaa-sama.

It's different from Okaa-sama's magic, which interferes with mental structure, but like Okaa-sama's magic, it acts upon the target's mind.

It's a magic which freezes their soul.

So as to not involve unrelated people in the effect, I took aim only at the one wearing the Antinite ring—

And activated my mental freeze magic, 'Cocytus'.

The Cast Jamming stopped.

I knew that the person had 'stopped' as well.

He was the third human I had 'stopped' in this manner.

They aren't killed, but that which is frozen will never again melt, that which is stilled will never again move; the same as death.

To hold back my guilt, I ground my teeth together.

In doing so, valuable time was lost.

That was my weakness.

So therefore, this result was well deserved.

I knew he wasn't alone.

I knew there were numerous muzzles pointed in our direction.

As Sakurai-san activated her magic, those triggers were pulled at the same time.

The magic Sakurai-san had been forming dissipated with no effect.

One sweep of those machine guns drilled me, and Okaa-sama, and Sakurai-san, full of holes.

The places I'm hit are,

Not so much painful as,

Hot.

My whole body is,

Cold.

I understood that flowing out of me was not only my blood, but also my life.

I am, going to die……

I had always thought that when you die you're supposed to feel things like regret or attachment, but surprisingly I can't think of anything.

If I could have just one regret, it would be, that I had wanted to apologise to that person properly.

If I didn't exist, that person could have lived a more normal life.

He could have been free.

I'm sorry, Nii-san.

I'm so sorry, Onii-sa……

"Miyuki!"

I'm hearing things.

I'm thinking about my brother, so my mind conveniently fabricates my brother's voice for me, I thought.

I mean, there's no way my brother would call my name with so much emotion, in such a desperate voice.

As if he didn't want me to go.

I fluttered my eyelids open with difficulty, and greeting me was the sight of an overcast sky, disappeared walls, rebels nowhere to be seen, and, my brother, with his left hand stretched out towards me.

An overwhelming 'something' was released from my brother's left hand.

It covered my dying body, easily penetrated my barrier of Data Fortification, and flowed into me.

My brother's 'heart' enveloped me.

I could think of no other way to describe it.

It read my body's everything, and remade everything anew.

My body, 'me' myself, was being recreated.

By my brother's will, by my brother's strength.

Merely calling it magic could not describe its power, its exquisiteness, and its audacity yet delicacy.

No, without a doubt, this is 'magic'.

This is something truly worthy of the appellation 'magic'.

I felt like I could see the God of Death, in the distance, turning away.

Absolutely helpless and seeming rather vexed.

Of course, that must have been a hallucination.

The God of Death in my hallucination seemed rather human, and without thinking, I gave a little laugh.

There was no longer any sensation of blood welling up in my throat at all.

"Miyuki, are you alright!?"

My brother's anxious face filled my now clear field of view.

This is the first time I've seen such raw emotion on this person's face.

"Onii-sama……"

For some reason, that word passed smoothly through my lips.

There was no feel of stuttering at all.

"Thank goodness……!"

It's fine to tremble.

It's fine to get flustered even more.

I mean, that person is tightly and firmly embracing me.

—But I shamelessly felt that being in Onii-sama's arms was where I belonged, as if this were only natural.

That must be why, when Onii-sama embraced me, I had reflexively grabbed the hem of his shirt.

Onii-sama looked at me with wide open eyes, then softening them, stroked my head.

"Ah....."

Without thinking, my voice leaked out.

In response Onii-sama gave a decidedly teasing smile, then looked away as if embarrassed— his face tightened.

He was expressionless not in the sense of lacking emotion, but in the sense that he seemed to be fully concentrating on something.

As if he were desperately remembering something.

In his line of sight were, even now on death's door, the profiles of Okaa-sama and Sakurai-san.

"Onii-sama!"

Without answering my call, or perhaps his focus was such that he couldn't even afford to do so, Onii-sama pulled out a CAD with his left hand.

An utterly incredible torrent of Psions stirred in Onii-sama's body.

Onii-sama was constructing a vast Psion Information Aide capable of holding unbelievable amounts of data.

His index finger pulled the trigger of his CAD.

It seemed as if Okaa-sama's body was being sucked into Onii-sama's left hand.

That was an illusion of course.

I don't know what he's doing, but I do know what's happening.

I could guess correctly, because the exact same thing had happened to me.

Onii-sama took all the data configuring Okaa-sama's body, copied it into his magic processing area, and after processing overwrote Okaa-sama's physical information.

The gunshot wounds disappeared.

The blood splattering the floor and soaking her clothes disappeared.

In a rush, I ran up to Okaa-sama's fallen body.

Although pale, sure enough, she was breathing.

The same state as just before she was shot..... No, this is..... Making it as if she were never shot in the first place?

Onii-sama pointed the CAD in his left hand towards Sakurai-san.

In a speed incomparable with Okaa-sama's turn, he quickly and smoothly completed the Psion Information Aide.

Is he getting used to it.....?

After just three tries, Onii-sama has already mastered this ultra-high level magic capable of completely restoring a person's body!

I trembled in awe, yet at the same time my heart coolly regarded this as only natural.

—I mean, this person is my Onii-sama after all—

My chest was full of pride.

All of my ignorant foolishness, scattered to the winds.

With a face saying 'I don't believe it', Sakurai-san looked down at her own body. Okaa-sama had not awoken, but her breathing was stable. She hadn't fainted but was rather merely sleeping so there was no pressing worry, said the Army surgeon who had hurried over, and I gave a sigh of relief.

"I am sorry. For an uprising to happen here is completely my fault. This won't be able to change anything, but if there is anything you want, please just say it. As a soldier of the National Defense Force, I will do whatever is within my power."

Onii-sama, next to me, turned to face Captain Kazama.

Seeing the Captain's bowed visage, he said 'please raise your head'.

It seemed the reason Onii-sama had been able to rush over at the very last minute had been thanks to the help of Captain Kazama and Lieutenant Sanada. Those rebels likely intended to kidnap us as hostages, and looking back we had managed to escape that due to Lance Corporal Higaki's intervention. —Their real target had been that man, and we had simply been caught up in the situation. He was an executive in a munitions company, and both him and his family were now guarded in a separate room. That means the military, by having us share a room with that man, were responsible for our deaths. It's also an indisputable fact however that it was thanks to the time Higaki-san bought, that Onii-sama was able to make it in time.

But, if it weren't for Onii-sama's magic, there is no doubt that Okaa-sama, Sakurai-san and I would have died.

Emotionally, this couldn't be overlooked.

"Then first of all, please tell us the exact situation."

I didn't intend to demand anything.

I'm sorry, but I wouldn't have allowed Sakurai-san to take the lead either.

Even if Okaa-sama had been awake, in this case I would have had her remain silent.

This is a right for Onii-sama alone.

"Is the enemy the Great Asian Alliance?"

"We have no conclusive evidence yet, but that is most likely the case."

"It's a lie that we've stopped them at the coast, isn't it?"

"That is so. On the West coast of Nagoshi, submerged enemy troops have already made a landing in force."

.....Then the submarine that time was in preparation for this?

"The enemy navy holds supremacy over the waters of the Keramas. In addition, from Naha to Nago, guerrillas in collusion with the enemy are disrupting the movement of personnel."

.....That sounds pretty bad.

"But all is not lost. The number of guerrillas was not that great from the beginning. Control has been regained in 80% of the areas affected. The internal rebellion in the Army will soon be shut down as well."

"Their purpose of buying time to secure the landings is already done, so their use is at an end. Like tossing a piece of garbage, I believe the Great Asian Alliance couldn't care less about their loss."

At Onii-sama's dispassionate point, Captain Kazama's face twisted sourly.

"Next, please protect my mother, sister, and Sakurai-san in a safe place. If possible, somewhere safer than the shelters."

".....We'll take them to the Air Defense Command and Control Center. The armor there is twice as thick as the shelters."

.....I was scandalised. The Command and Control Center operated by the military was far better protected than the shelters they had evacuated the civilians to. Then again this is a military base after all, so I guess that's just how things were built.

"Lastly, please lend me an Armor Suit and infantry kit. Well, I say lend, but I won't be able to return the expendable supplies to you."

".....Why?"

I also could not help feeling uneasy about this request.

Why, Onii-sama?

And why did you not include yourself in your earlier request?

Looking into Onii-sama's eyes, trying to discern his true intentions, I gasped.

Within his eyes,

Making mere rage seem lukewarm,

Burned all consuming hellfire.

"They dared to raise their hand against Miyuki. They must reap their just reward."

Amongst all those who heard that voice and felt their blood run cold, for Captain Kazama to keep his complexion unchanged, spoke volumes for his courage.

"Do you intend to go alone?"

"This is not a military operation. This is personal."

"I don't mind that in particular. It is impossible for humans to fight a war separate from emotions. Even a fight for revenge, as long as it is controlled, is no problem."

Onii-sama and Captain Kazama's eyes met.

Rather, they were glaring at each other.

"We cannot allow the slaughter of non-combatants and the surrendered, but you have no such intention anyway right?"

"I do not intend to give them the grace of surrender."

"That is fine. Our mission is the repulsion of the invaders or their utter destruction. There is no need to offer surrender."

Captain Kazama is a different kind of person to Onii-sama, but his resolve is not one whit less.

"Shiba Tatsuya-kun. We welcome you to our line of battle."

Onii-sama, showed no hint of gratitude.

"I do not intend to follow the command of the army. What I fight for, and what you fight for, are different things. But we share a common enemy, and if we share a common goal of annihilation, then let us fight side by side."

Like a steel edge tempered by a legendary craftsman, the air around Onii-sama was cold, sharp, merciless.....At such an Onii-sama, I could only stare in awe.

"Very well. Sanada, find him an Armor Suit and gear! Airborne, we move in 10!"

"Sakurai-san, please look after my mother and sister."

Standing, Onii-sama said so to Sakurai-san, then without waiting for her reply followed after Lieutenant Sanada.

That time, the faint smile he wore when he looked at me was definitely not an illusion.

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"Um, are you sure this is alright?"

As I watched my brother's back receding, Sakurai-san stepped up to me and began talking.

"What is it?"

It seems, as if my thought processes had been sabotaged or escaped altogether; I had not moved my attention for a while.

"However skilled Tatsuya-kun is, fighting a war..... Nevermind rushing straight to the front lines, isn't that far too dangerous?"

"!"

Sakurai-san's whisper, rang in my ears like a loud alarm clock.

That's right! What am I spacing out so calmly for? Onii-sama is going to war!

"Miyuki-san!?"

Sakurai-san's voice floated behind my back as I ran.

Only her voice chased me.

She cannot afford to leave Okaa-sama.

I'm sorry.

I apologised to her in my heart.

Leaving Okaa-sama behind is painful, but right now, I have to stop Onii-sama!

I ran with that one thought in mind.

Fortunately, he had not yet gone that far ahead, and I caught up to him without getting lost.

"Onii-sama!"

He might not turn around. That fear flashed through my mind but it was a needless worry.

Onii-sama said something quietly to Lieutenant Sanada in front of him, then halted and faced this way.

Sanada-san stopped a while ahead. He probably did so with our consideration in mind.

"Miyuki, what is it?"

At him naturally, in a natural tone calling me 'Miyuki' I began to dreamily glaze over again, but this isn't the time for that.

"Onii-sama, um,"

I suddenly realised that I must not, under any circumstance, begin saying 'please don't go' over and over.

That's far too much like the kind of thing a heroine would say to stop her lover in some romance movie (or novel or manga or whatever) or something.

Not to mention bringing in the whole 'forbidden love between brother and sister' mess.

"Miyuki?"

As I stood suddenly lost for words, Onii-sama looked at me in a puzzled manner.

My cheeks must have been bright red.

"......Pl-Please don't go."

Even so, it's not like I can just not say it then. I have to stop him.

"Please don't do something so dangerous as fighting the enemy army. I don't believe there's any need for Onii-sama to do something so risky."

I said it.....!

Feeling a sense of accomplishment, I thought 'this should be fine'.

For Onii-sama to shake his head at my words— to shake his head at all, was something I had never once considered.

"Certainly, there's no need. I am not going because there's a need, but because I wish to, Miyuki."

Which was why my brother's reply was such a shock to me.

Shocked at the denial, and shocked at his words almost implying he wanted to kill people.

But my body, rather than trying to distance itself from him, reached out and caught his sleeve.

With a clumsy smile, he took hold of my hand grasping onto his jacket, and gently pulled it away.

"As I said earlier, I am going for revenge against those who have hurt you."

Looking into my eyes, Onii-sama's expression was almost embarrassed.

"Not for your sake, but for the sake of my own feelings."

While saying so, Onii-sama's pupils...

"If I don't, I won't be able to rest."

Seemed to be telling me that everything was for my sake.

"To me, the only thing I can feel is truly precious is you alone, Miyuki."

That wasn't my mistake.

"Sorry for being such a selfish brother."

That wasn't my conceit.

Onii-sama softly released my hand, and gave me a laugh while maintaining his somewhat embarrassed expression.

My entire face must have been burning red.

However, recalling something troubling in Onii-sama's words, I furrowed my brow.

"Can feel, is precious.....?"

Just now Onii-sama hadn't said 'is precious', but 'can feel is precious' right?

It's simply a slight difference in wording, and may not have any particular meaning behind it but..... For some reason, I'm anxious.

As those words subconsciously slipped from my mouth which wasn't even a question, Onii-sama gave a wry smile which seemed to say 'you got me'.

His expression seemed to be laughing, yet crying.

There was nothing like tears, not to mention I have never even once seen Onii-sama cry, yet somehow I could sense that to Onii-sama this was a matter fraught with pain and full of sorrow.

"I am sorry!"

So I apologised. I had vowed that I would cause Onii-sama no more sadness, and yet again I.....thinking so, I bowed low.

Two slender hands slipped through and parted my long hair, caressing my cheeks. Onii-sama's hands, slim yet far bigger than mine, strong and firm.

His hands gently lifted my head, and I looked up.

There was no force in them, yet I could never resist. Rather, faster than my head could resist, my body complied with Onii-sama's will.

"No.....I suppose it's about time you knew. If possible, I would have preferred that you never found out but..... As our mother's daughter, and that person's niece, that would have been a fleeting dream in any case."

Onii-sama's words were aimed at me, yet it seemed as if he wasn't talking to me, but reminding himself.

"Onii-sama?"

"There's no time at the moment, and I don't believe this is something that should be heard from me. So Miyuki, please go and ask our mother. The answer to the questions you have right now."

"From Okaa-sama.....?"

To me without time to collect my uncertainties, simply blankly repeating his words back at him, Onii-sama gave one more smile, this time strong.

"Miyuki, don't worry. You are the one thing precious to me. Therefore, in order to continue protecting you in the future, I will definitely come back safe."

There was no deceit in Onii-sama's words.

There was no sense of comforting.

"I'll be alright."

Sheathing his smile and tightening his expression, his gaze unwavering,

As if it were a true and undeniable fact.

"There is nothing in existence which can hurt me in the truest sense."

I believed that there was nothing at all which could harm Onii-sama.

Onii-sama moved his hands from my cheek to my head, and stroked my hair.

He ran his hands over my now slightly messed up hair, laughing all the while, then moved to continue after Lieutenant Sanada.

This time, for real, Onii-sama headed towards the battlefield.

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Then again, as you'd expect, I had no idea where this Command and Control Center place was.

I had no choice but to return to that room which has lost its wall.

Come to think of it, how did the wall disappear?

Onii-sama and Sakurai-san had said that a barrier which blocked magic had been incorporated, meaning that the chances it had been destroyed by magic were low, yet the cross section was so surgically precise that it was hard to imagine any other way.

Although I'm pretty sure they wouldn't leave me behind, I couldn't help being anxious and returned to the room at a trot.

Ah.....

"I'm sorry for having kept you waiting."

First I apologised to Okaa-sama, who greeted me.

As important as it is to recover her strength, there's no way she can simply be carried on a stretcher, so thinking about it, it's only natural that she'd be awoken by some means.

Because of my own selfish discretion and abandonment of Okaa-sama, which resulted in forcing them to wait, I bowed low not to escape her anger, but out of true regret.

"There's no need to apologise, Miyuki-san. You went to stop Tatsuya going off as he pleased, didn't you?"

Okaa-sama answered with a smile.

Uu.....She's pretty mad.....

"So, where did Tatsuya go? I don't see him around."

"That's, um.....Onii-sama went to help the military fight the enemy."

"Onii-sama?"

Okaa-sama raised an eyebrow.

Reflexively I thought 'oh dear', but I didn't once think of correcting myself.

Okaa-sama didn't reprove me either.

Instead of blame, she simply gave a long sigh.

"Doing things his own way as usual……that child truly is defective."

Her words weren't denouncing, they were forsaking.

Not resignation, but abandonment.

I didn't even have to ask who she was talking about.

Rather than indignation, I felt appalled.

For a mother to be so utterly indifferent concerning her own son.

"Well, whatever. Things seem to have somehow worked out this time, so let him do as he wants…… Thanks for waiting. Please take us now."

Okaa-sama spoke to the soldier waiting to guide us.

No, things didn't 'somehow' work out.

The only reason I'm alive, the only reason Okaa-sama was saved, was because of Onii-sama.

Yet to that 'somehow', I was unable to say a word in dispute.

Entering the Command and Control Center, we had passed through no less than five blast doors.

On a floor around the size of four classrooms with no windows and no walls connected directly to the outside, around 30 operators sat in front of three rows of consoles in one hall, while opposite the large wall-mounted screen was an entrance leading to eight single mezzanine rooms.

We were lead to one of the single rooms with a glass front.

"I don't sense any cameras or wiretap surveillance. It seems like this is one of the rooms high level officers and executives in the Ministry of Defense use while on inspection."

After examining the room, Sakurai-san informed Okaa-sama.

I have no idea what she did or how she did it, but her findings are always reliable.

That means it's okay to talk about secrets in here.

"The glass in front isn't just ordinary glass either. They have the same thing in the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department. It's capable of projecting anything from the monitors in the Command and Control Center."

Sakurai said so while watching the desktop monitor and operating the console.

"Okaa-sama, there's something I'd like to ask."

In the meantime, I decided to take the plunge, and ask Okaa-sama about the matter from before.

"Earlier, Onii-sama had said that the only thing which he can consider precious is me, but……when I asked him why he didn't say 'is precious' but rather 'can feel is precious', he said I should ask you, so……"

"I see. Tatsuya said that."

Listening to my question with a frown, Okaa-sama said that with a bored expression.

"I suppose it's about time you knew."

Onii-sama had said the same thing. Just thinking about what this big secret was, I stiffened with tension.

"But, before that……Miyuki-san, stop calling Tatsuya 'Onii-sama'. I don't really mind in public places and the like where the presence of others can't be helped, but when alone with only the Yotsuba, you should not be treating Tatsuya like your brother."

Okaa-sama didn't reprove me in a strong tone, but was as if simply regaling me with an undeniable truth.

"You are the one who will follow after Maya and become the head of the Yotsuba. If you're seen depending on the utter failure that is your brother, it could become a huge minus in the future someday."

"That way of speaking is……!"

I instinctively forgot my restraint, and harshly rebuked my mother.

As tense as I was while listening carefully, no matter how much they were Okaa-sama's words I simply could not let them go unanswered.

"Calling your own child an utter failure like that!"

"I also think it's unfortunate, but it's the truth so it can't be helped."

"That's wrong! With his power, Onii-sama saved me!"

"That thing earlier? True, if he can't at least display that level of……still, that is all he can do."

At my heartfelt objection, Okaa-sama answered in a voice colder than I had ever heard up to now.

It was a voice which had abandoned all hope.

"If Tatsuya has told you to come to me, then I don't particularly mind. Where to begin……"

As my mother remained deep in thought, without warning the window taking the place of an entire wall changed the projected scenery.

The room full of frantically working operators changed to a bird's-eye view looking down on the earth.

In that view I saw Onii-sama, having just dropped from the sky.

I looked over at the one who had brought that up, Sakurai-san.

Sakurai-san was wordlessly watching me—watching me and Okaa-sama.

That she didn't intend to speak a word was obvious at a glance.

I also understood that she knew many things that I did not.

—Okaa-sama didn't so much as glance at the screen now showing Onii-sama.

"Tatsuya was born defective as a magician."

Okaa-sama didn't look at me either.

"It's not that I feel no responsibility for bearing such a child, but the unchangeable fact was that Tatsuya was a hopeless cause as a magician."

That didn't mean she had closed her eyes.

"From the time he was born, Tatsuya could use only two types of 'magic'. Decomposition of Eidos, and reconstruction of Information Bodies. Within the concept of these two categories Tatsuya has devised a variety of techniques he can use, but however far you take them, with just those two, it is impossible to alter Information Bodies as a true magician should."

Her eyes simply stared into nothingness.

"Magic are the techniques which modify Information bodies, and thus change phenomena. However trivial the change is, to be able to make the change at all is magic. But Tatsuya is unable to do that. All he can do is break an Information Body down, and recreate it back in an earlier state. That is not magic in its truest sense. That child, who was born without the talent to use magic in the true sense of the term in altering Information Bodies, is unquestionably a defective magician."

Perhaps, what Okaa-sama was looking into, was her own heart……

"Well, that reconstruction ability did end up saving us, but strictly speaking that power is not 'magic'."

I did not refute her words.

But, I thought.

If that isn't magic, then just what, should that power be called.

If it is to be given a name other than 'magic', then doesn't that only leave the word 'miracle'?

"But, we the Yotsuba are magicians who stand amongst the Ten Master Houses, and therefore one who cannot use magic cannot be a Yotsuba. That child, unable to use magic, could not live as one of the Yotsuba. So Maya and I, seven years ago, performed a certain operation on him. Although truth be told, the motivation behind that experiment wasn't that alone……"

Experiment? Okaa-sama, on Onii-sama?

"The Artificial Magician Plan. A project to implant in the consciousness of a person who isn't a magician, a man-made magic operation area and thus give him the abilities of a magician."

Artificial Magician Plan. Those words rang ominously in my ears.

"As a result of undergoing that mental reconstruction surgery, that child ended up losing his emotions."

Mental reconstruction surgery? Lost his emotions?"

"No, rather than saying emotions it may be better to say urges. Strong anger, deep sorrow, intense jealousy, grudges, hatred, hungering appetite, sexual lust, blind love. Such 'beside oneself' impulses were lost, with one single exception, and in exchange Tatsuya obtained the ability to use magic."

That means……

"Unfortunately, the artificial magic operation area is markedly inferior in performance to that of a natural one, and he could only end up being used as a Guardian."

I won't believe it, I thought.

There's no way that could be, I thought.

"The one who performed that 'surgery'……was it you, Okaa-sama?"

While thinking so, I couldn't help but ask.

The large 'window' now showed Onii-sama, surrounded by well-built adults, making contact with the enemy landing force.

"Who else could do it but me?"

My sincerest wish, that she would deny it, was not to be.

I really should have known.

The Magic Operation Area is not a physical area in the cerebrum, but rather is a direct mental function.

Adding an artificial Magic Operation Area would therefore entail altering the mental structure.

That would be impossible without Okaa-sama's magic, 'Mental Structure Interference'……

"……Why would you do that?"

"I've already told you the reasons. Let's answer something more important you wish to know."

—Ah, I see……

I've also noticed.

I realised.

In that experiment, it was not only Onii-sama who ended up losing some of his emotions.

I don't know whether it's a side effect of that magic, a sense of guilt or some other different mental effect but,

For the first time, I felt terror at this thing called 'magic'.

This 'magic', which could so cruelly alter the human heart.

On the screen, Onii-sama pointed a large pistol shaped CAD at the foe.

Before him, enemy after enemy faded to dust.

"The one exception that Tatsuya didn't lose…… Answer me that."

"The one impulse left to him, is brotherly love."

—Please stop already, Okaa-sama.

"Love towards his sister, in other words you, and the desire to protect you."

—I don't want to hear any more.

"That is all he has left, his one true emotion."

But that was not allowed to me.

Holding my two hands in front of my mouth was an instinctive action.

It may have been a conditioned reflex.

There wasn't really a need for it though.

I was so shocked, to the extent I couldn't let out a cry.

"Tatsuya himself knows well. That's what he means by 'can feel is precious'. He thinks of me simply as his 'mother', and the natural parent-child attachment which should go with it does not exist. The only one he can hold dear in his heart is only you, Miyuki. Back then, he simply saved me incidentally. Or perhaps, merely because he determined if I were to die then you would be sad."

"Did Okaa-sama……intentionally choose for this to happen?"

Even though I was speaking myself, it felt like I heard someone else talking. It felt like a me which was not me was moving my body and asking questions.

"I obviously didn't plan things out to that extent. However, I did think that if the capacity that was left was only enough for one emotion, then it should be affection directed towards you. Tatsuya will be spending far more time with you, after all."

"Did you say that to O— No, that person?"

"Of course I explained. That child still has plenty of common sense. Having no parental affection is trivial in any case, so there's no need to worry about it."

When she said that,

Faintly,

I felt I could glimpse Okaa-sama's suffering that she could not love her child.

"Is there anything else?"

"No……thank you very much."

A part of me, felt that I shouldn't have asked.

A part of me, also felt truly glad that I did ask.

To squarely face a painful past, and painful truths, yet unflinchingly look forwards to the present and the future.

The screen showed Onii-sama, advancing resolutely into a desolate wasteland.

Neither shell nor bullet could reach him.

Tank-like things pointed their turrets at Onii-sama, and vanished along with the crew inside.

Onii-sama continued without changing pace.

But the soldiers advancing with Onii-sama did not move the same way.

To not be left behind by Onii-sama, they ran as if flying from cover to cover, shooting guns and magic all the while.

Ah!

One of the soldiers was hit.

Seeing the battlefield from a camera in the sky, it's like watching something right from a movie.

Within the screen, before I could even begin feeling shock, Onii-sama was pointing the CAD in his left hand at the fallen soldier.

When did he?

There was barely any time to even turn his neck.

In the next moment, the soldier began running on the screen again as if nothing had happened.

An enemy turret spat fire.

It didn't reach.

Onii-sama raised his right hand.

The enemy form disappeared. It was almost like the special effects of a movie.

Allied soldiers fell.

Onii-sama raised his left hand.

Just with that, the fallen soldiers rose unscathed and continued the fight.

What was shown on that screen was to me, with a far greater grasp of magic than not only the general public but most magicians, like a movie with an extremely poor sense of reality.

But those would be the irresponsible thoughts of a bystander.

To the soldiers fighting alongside Onii-sama, it was a fortune beyond their wildest hopes. Any injuries, even fatal ones, were healed immediately as if merely waking from a dream.

To the enemies fighting against Onii-sama, he was terror incarnate. A nightmare who raised their foes, and obliterated all before him leaving only shadows and dust.

Like an Avatar, Onii-sama strode across the battlefield.

All because I had gotten shot.

That was something decreed seven years ago, from the time he was only six.

How can I possibly make it up to him?

What can I do to ever make it up to him?

Even this life now, is something I owe completely to him.

Chapter 15

November 6th, AD 2095 / Yotsuba Main House - Drawing room

It had been one week since they parted at Tsushima base.

On that day, Tatsuya had been dismissed earlier, and beyond what was available to the general public, knew no more about the final outcomes of the battle than anyone else. Having the opportunity to reunite with Kazama here, he tried asking various questions, but it seemed there were many parts unknown even to Kazama.

Exchanging information with Kazama — although all that Tatsuya could provide could not be said to possess certainty beyond the boundaries of 'rumors' — Tatsuya, deep in thought, suddenly turned to face the door.

Tension crept down Miyuki's spine.

From her brother's expression, she knew.

At last—

"Excuse me."

After a formal knock, the door was opened without waiting for a reply.

Bowing deferentially this time was an elderly butler. Visibly different from the youth earlier, this man clearly possessed a high position.

However, he said no more.

Despite the fact that simply opening the door shouldn't be the extent of this man's job.

But neither Tatsuya and Miyuki, nor Kazama felt any suspicion.

Rather, they were thinking similarly, that the only one fit for this role must be this elderly man.

"Thank you for waiting."

For behind the elderly man, stood the figure of the Head of this House.

"I truly am very sorry. Our previous guest simply would not leave……while he had gone far past our appointed time, we couldn't simply throw him out or such……"

"Please do not be concerned. We know that you are very busy."

Kazama returned Maya's bow, and at length they both sat down.

"Miyuki-san, my apologies to you as well."

At that, Miyuki also sat down slowly.

However, she said not a word to Tatsuya.

He simply remained standing next to the sofa Miyuki sat in.

In appearance, he mirrored exactly the butler who now stood next to Maya.

White porcelain teacups were set down before three people.

It went without speaking that those three were Maya, Kazama, and Miyuki.

Maya beckoned the two to their tea, and after taking a sip herself, cut straight to the point.

"The reason I have called you here today is because there are some matters stemming from the recent military incident in Yokohama which I would like to tell you."

"To me?"

Maya the civilian was saying that she had things to tell, not ask, concerning military matters to the military man Kazama. Of course he would repeat it.

"Yes, and to Tatsuya-san and Miyuki-san as well."

Saying so, Maya gave a meaningful smile.

Without even having to look bored as she said so, her expression made it plain that her truly pressing matters were for Tatsuya and Miyuki.

"A week ago, the International Magic Association concluded that the blast which obliterated the Zhènhai Naval Port was not in violation of the charter forbidding the use of 'radiation emitting weapons'".

'Radiation emitting weapons' was an abbreviation for 'weapons which contaminate the environment with residual radioactivity', a term mainly used by the International Magic Association, whose purpose is preventing the use of weapons which emit and leave behind radioactive residues as well as the national magic associations affiliated with them. The word 'weapon' was used, but the clause also included any magic which would

result in radioactive contamination. The term itself was rare outside the Association, but despite being somewhat of a traditionalist magician, Kazama nevertheless naturally knew about it.

"As a result, the punishment motion submitted to the Association was rejected."

Miyuki's tense expression tensed even further for a moment, then relaxed.

"I was not aware a punishment motion had been forwarded."

Kazama replied in a bland tone. Miyuki knew that there was no way Kazama hadn't at least considered the possibility, but didn't speak a word.

"You do seem rather relaxed. You had no concern about the possibility of a penal detachment?"

By contrast, Maya hit back with a direct question.

Magicians were administered by the state, weapons of the state, and as such belonged to the state.

Even private magicians were forbidden from acting in any way which might go against the national interest. In this respect, globally, the rights of magicians were significantly limited in comparison to those of non-magicians.

Because of that, the International Magic Association had no military force of its own. The magicians belonging to the IMA were not of a scale anywhere approaching a force.

In return, the IMA called for the cooperation of each member state in order to implement multinational teams. If this 'mystery bomb' had resulted in the formation of a penal detail, those various countries which wished for a decline in Japan's national power would have sent their own powerful magicians along as well. As someone involved in the military, that was not a negligible concern.

"I was fully aware and confident that there would be no residual radiation."

Kazama didn't say that she should have been well aware as well. It was so obvious there was no need to do so.

Sure enough, Maya changed the subject.

"Then were you aware that the 'Heavenly General' was present with and perished alongside the fleet?"

"Liú Yúndé?"

At Maya's news, Kazama's poker face collapsed.

Kazama's wide eyes as he asked back was unfeigned.

"Yes, one of the thirteen internationally acknowledged Strategic Class magicians. Nevertheless, the Great Asian Alliance is trying to keep a rather tight lid on information control."

Although there was no such thing as privacy when it came to Strategic Class magicians, Maya laughed.

As she said, Strategic Class magicians, individuals wielding power comparable to weapons of mass destruction, were of great interest to many major powers and of greater interest to their magicians. Aside from gimmicks like Antinite, the only true counter to a magician was another magician, and as such, keeping enemy Strategic magicians in check was a major objective of military magicians.

Thirteen Strategic Class magicians had been declassified for the sake of national prestige, and amongst these so called 'Thirteen Apostles' the only one who had managed to keep a modicum of secrecy was the USNA's Angie Sirius.

Of course Japan was no exception in keeping extensive tabs on the Thirteen Apostles and the Ten Families, with the inclusion of Angie Sirius of whom besides her name — to be precise her nickname and codename — not even her real face was known, and devoted great effort to that field.

"Well with that, I guess the 'Thirteen Apostles' is now the 'Twelve Apostles'."

Maya smoothly summarized that major upheaval in international military balance with one easy sentence.

This was confidential information which even Kazama had not been informed of.

"It seems the government is looking to capitalize on this and wring as many major concessions from the Great Asian Alliance as possible. The

Chief of Staff had requested the Itsuwa be sent out, and the Itsuwa complied. Mio-san is accompanying them to the fleet in Sasebo."

"Did she board a warship?"

Until now, Miyuki had respectfully maintained her position as a listener, but at this she instinctively spoke up.

"Yes."

However, Maya did not reprimand her. This news was astonishing enough that such a reaction would not be unreasonable.

Itsuwa Mio was the only Strategic Class magician the Japanese government had publicly disclosed, one of the 'Thirteen Apostles'.

As far as had been confirmed, with the exception of Tatsuya, she was the only Japanese Strategic magician.

A trump card of the Japanese military.

Her magic 'Abyss' was capable of creating a spherical depression which can extend from a few tens of meters to several kilometers. Amongst Movement Systematic magics it possesses its own classification, Fluid Control. Vessels caught within the magical zone at sea slide down the steep walls of water, tumbling about, then upon cancellation of the magic are swallowed up by massive waves as the sea returns to a horizontal plane. The hemisphere can be created up to a kilometer in depth, easily catching submerged submarines as well.

This is a strategic class magic theoretically capable of eradicating entire fleets with a single blow, however;

'Abyss' can also be invoked upon subterranean ground water, potentially allowing it to collapse vast swathes of structures as well.

"......Still, that would be a considerable strain on her body wouldn't it?"

"I'm sure they've factored that in. Both the Staff and the Itsuwa. They probably consider this too big to miss."

At Miyuki's worried question, Maya gave an absentminded answer.

In contrast to Itsuwa Mio's powerful magic, her body was quite weak.

It wasn't quite apparent until around her mid teens, but from the age of 20 she was forced to use a motorized wheelchair to move around. It wasn't that her legs were afflicted such that she couldn't walk, but because even the slightest exertion was exhausting. After graduating from university, it was said she rarely ever left the Itsuwa house.

The Itsuwa were currently one of the Ten Master Houses, but in fact that was largely based on the fact that they had the Strategic Class magician Mio. For her to be aboard a warship that would likely see battle, however brief that period of time was, could only be said to be a gamble.

"Just as we had news of Liú Yúndé's movements, it seems our mobilization of Mio-san has not gone unnoticed. Again this is as of yet unconfirmed, but we have received a report that Doctor Bezobrazov arrived in Vladivostok today."

Hearing that name, Kazama's expression was moved again.

"—The 'Igniter' Igor Andreevich Bezobrazov?"

"Yes, that very Doctor Bezobrazov. Having witnessed the recent events off the Southern Korean Peninsula, their military leadership appears to have reconsidered the effectiveness of large scale magic."

While he didn't let out a sound, Tatsuya was just as surprised.

Igor Andreevich Bezobrazov was a scientist in the Soviet Academy of Science, yet at the same time, a Strategic Class magician of the New Soviet Union.

He was not a classified Strategic magician like Tatsuya, but rather like Mio was a state recognized member of the Thirteen Apostles. His Strategic magic 'Tuman Bomba'[14], whilst one step outclassed by the USNA's Angie Sirius' 'Heavy Metal Burst' in power, was said to possess the greatest destructive radius of the Thirteen.

Until now, countries had only demonstrated their Strategic magics without applying them for actual combat use, but in the most recent conflict four Strategic magicians, including Tatsuya, had been mobilized.

"It's likely the Great Asian Alliance has received similar intel—"

"Peace should be established in the near future then?"

"I believe that would be the case."

In that pause, Maya looked at Kazama with a smile. Despite the fact she was in her mid 40s, that smile combined youthful cuteness and adult sex appeal which made her seem no older than 30.

Such charm was wasted on Kazama however, as he silently waited for the next words.

"......Our history from since three years ago, will be settled with this."

The slight color of frustration which flitted past Maya's face as she resumed her talk couldn't have wholly been Tatsuya's imagination.

"The disappearance of Zhènhai Naval Port has attracted the attention of numerous countries. The cause of that was unmistakably due to Strategic class magic, and a not inconsiderable number of them are beginning to probe around as to just who the operator was. It is most likely some of them will link this with the annihilation of the fleet the Great Asian Alliance dispatched three years ago. It would be a very undesirable outcome for us to have Tatsuya-san's identity to come out."

"I fully agree."

Seeing Kazama's nod, Maya gave a broad smile indistinguishable between real and fake.

No, it's likely that her smile this time was sincere.

"I'm glad you understand. Then to be on the safe side, I'd like you to refrain from being in contact with Tatsuya-san for a while as well."

Maya's negotiation with Kazama was steered to obtain the most satisfactory result for the Yotsuba.

It'd be too much to say that he was led around, but the concession that Tatsuya would no longer be called to battle with the Great Asian Alliance for this conflict was unmistakably Maya's pace.

Then again the terms like 'will you comply with this verbal contract' and 'will you abide by all aspects of this verbal contract' are things which likely would have question marks in parenthesis after them.

Now Maya was alone with Tatsuya in the drawing room. After wrapping things up Kazama naturally left—he was just as busy after all—and Miyuki had vacated the room at Maya's direct order.

Then despite having even instructed her attendant to leave, Maya didn't cut directly to the chase.

She simply sat for a while sipping tea from her cup with a look of dissatisfaction, as Tatsuya sat down in silence facing her.

In silence, in other words, without asking or waiting for permission.

His appearance as he leaned back in his chair waiting for her words was absent from all apprehension or fear.

Glancing at that appearance, Maya returned her cup to its saucer.

"The last time we faced each other like this was three years ago huh."

There was no hint of hubris in her voice or expression.

"This is the first time I have been called out like this, Oba-ue[15]."

"I wonder."

At Tatsuya's usual cynical rather than respectful air, Maya also adopted a more informal attitude than before.

"Come to think of it, this is the first time we've spoken alone."

"Yes."

That's not to say their rapport was 'friendly'.

The light glinting in their eyes was too strong for that.

"So what is it you wished to speak about?"

"Don't be in such a hurry. Won't you have some tea?"

"If you start going around giving me tea, your entourage is going to start saying some annoying things."

At Tatsuya's all too candid remark, Maya let out a breath.

"Honesty isn't always a virtue you know."

"Remonstrations for the sake of another are always painful to hear."

Their banter flew back and forth like rapid keystrokes.

Maya didn't anger, but rather gave an approving nod.

"An unreserved companion is also good once in a while."

"Is it disagreeable to you?"

"The relationship between us is that of nephew and aunt. There is no need for such concerns."

After those words replied in a tone indiscernible from her true feelings or a simple façade, Maya picked up the buzzer on the table.

The faint chime of a handbell rang out, yet neither the door nor the walls of this room were particularly thin.

Despite that not a minute later a soft knock rang from the door, meaning that the room must have been monitored in some way; nevertheless Tatsuya did not hurry to stand.

"Did you call for me?"

The elderly butler from earlier returned to the scene. Even seeing Tatsuya's leisurely seated appearance, he didn't bat an eyelid.

"Hayama-san, some more tea for me please. And the same for Tatsuya-san as well."

"Certainly."

Had it been Aoki, he no doubt would have gone pale and started yelling at Tatsuya. Forgetting even that he was in the presence of Maya.

But there was no way a confidant permitted even to 'eavesdrop' at the side of his master, whatever the appearance or reasons, would ever be prone to such petty outbursts.

The reason Tatsuya was so relaxed also stemmed from that.

Not to mention that it would have been impossible to 'smooth things out' anyway.

Because it was visible with a glance that Tatsuya held no submissiveness towards Maya whatsoever.

While waiting for the tea, Maya didn't utter a word.

Tatsuya likewise was in no hurry.

'Won't you have some tea' basically meant 'we'll talk over tea'. It wasn't particularly exerting to figure such a thing out, and only a child would make a fuss about waiting for such a period of time.

At length after taking a sip from the cup the butler Hayama brought, Maya finally seemed to be in the mood.

"Thank you for your efforts in this event, Tatsuya-san."

Hearing that tone, no one would take those words at face value.

"No, there's no such thing."

Tatsuya likewise was under no delusion that he was being praised.

"However, it's something troubling for the Yotsuba."

"I am sorry."

Sure enough, she began voicing complaints with a theatrical sigh, and Tatsuya gave a formal apology. Not that he did anything laudable like fall prostrate to the ground or rub his forehead against the table or anything.

"……Well, I know that you were simply following orders. Although I had wanted to ask Major Kazama if there really was a need to go so far. Well, there's no point fretting over the past."

"I'm sorry for the trouble."

Tatsuya's apology this time was slightly more sincere. Morality aside, Tatsuya also personally felt that what happened was a little overkill. —Actually not 'a little' but closer to the point of excessive, mindless destruction.

"More important now are the problems from here."

"Is there anything concrete so far?"

Maya did not give an immediate answer to Tatsuya's question.

Rather she closed her eyes, took a sip of tea, then slowly looked up.

Directly into Tatsuya's eyes.

Tatsuya didn't meet her gaze, instead lifting his cup to his mouth in the same way as his aunt.

"The Stars are moving."

Her words as she resolutely maintained eye contact held the power to freeze Tatsuya's movement for just a moment.

"Meaning that America itself is moving, huh."

Having at last reached this point, Maya and Tatsuya finally clashed head to head.

It was impossible to compare the weights behind them.

On the one hand Maya had the entire might of the Yotsuba at her back, while defending Tatsuya would likely be Miyuki alone.

Yet the steel in Tatsuya's eyes did not lose an inch to the pressure Maya exuded.

"For now, the Stars have simply begun their own investigation. But they have already grasped that the explosion was caused by a magic which converts mass into energy. That narrows down the identity of the operator considerably. —Specifically, enough to pinpoint you and Miyuki-san as one of the suspects."

At Maya's information, Tatsuya could only shake his head.

"……That's quite the amazing ability to gather information."

"Their reputation as the most powerful force of magicians in the world isn't just for show."

"No, the one I was praising was you Oba-ue."

There was no reply.

Maya fell silent as if deep in thought.

"Whilst I admit that they are likely the most powerful force out there, the intelligence the USNA Stars' has managed to procure is almost real-time. Have you considered the possibility of a spy?"

"……I can't say. Unfortunately."

"Well of course."

As if he had somehow worked out Maya's response, Tatsuya nodded with a straight face.

For a moment Maya seemed rather resentful, but as expected immediately regained her smile.

"……In any case, you must be careful of your surroundings. The Stars are not like the soft opponents you have gone up against until now. If they determine that you are a threat to the hegemony of the United States, it is possible that they have the capability to take you down."

"Meaning that if the likelihood of the Yotsuba getting involved rises too high, I can expect assassins from a different direction. I'll bear that in mind."

The aunt and nephew stared at each other.

There was no longer even the hint of a smile upon their face.

"It's a bit early to be thinking that far."

"You believed that I would arrive at that conclusion in this place, which was why you sent Miyuki outside was it not?"

Tatsuya's wording changed slightly.

Maya did not verbally answer his challenge.

Rather, her answer could be found in her looking away.

"Tatsuya, drop out of school."

When she finally spoke, it was not a reply but rather a command.

"Drop out of school, why?"

"To lie low here in this house for a while. The Guardianship of Miyuki-san will be transferred to another."

"I believe the selection of Guardian was a matter for the escorted to decide."

"Everything has its exception."

"Well, fair enough…… But I refuse."

If there had been another in the room, they would have shivered at the sudden drop in temperature.

Not a physical drop, but rather due to the incredible tension.

"If I suddenly drop out at this time, I believe it would be as good as a confession that I was the magician who destroyed the fleet of the Great Asian Alliance."

"The reason is irrelevant."

"I suppose."

There was no longer a trace of expression upon either Maya or Tatsuya's face.

"You are disobeying my direct order?"

"The only one allowed to order me is Miyuki alone."

The tension reached its peak.

Within that period of urgency, as if time had stopped,

The world turned to 'Night'.

It was not mere darkness.

Floating within the darkness, shone a brilliant sea of stars.

The roof of the drawing room became a moonless, starlit night sky.

The stars flowed, becoming rays of light,

—And the scent of blood suddenly filled the room.

In the next moment,

Without a sound,

That indoor 'Night' shattered.

Revealed within was the tableau of the aunt and nephew, still staring at each other without change.

However the sense of tension which had once surged between them, had faded with the collapse of 'Night'.

"—It seems you went rather easy on me."

"Of course. You're my cute nephew after all."

Maya smiled at Tatsuya's mutter.

No wounds remained on either of the two, and the scent of blood had faded.

"Still, even allowing for that, you did well. And so, this time I will permit you your selfishness."

"Thank you very much."

"It's fine. Take it as a treat for breaking my magic."

Wordlessly, Tatsuya rose.

At his light bow, Maya shook her hands in a flutter.

Tatsuya left the room.

There was not a voice raised in challenge to stop him from anywhere.

◊ ◊ ◊

After Tatsuya had left the drawing room Maya had been left lost in thought alone for a while, but at length she exhaled strongly and picked up the buzzer once more.

"Did you call?"

"I'd like a change of scenery. Please prepare tea in the solarium, and bring Miyuki-san and Tatsuya-san along."

The butler Hayama showed up immediately, and Maya dictated her wishes.

"Certainly."

Hayama bowed, then without making eye contact quickly cleared up the cups.

As he carried out Maya's instructions, then prepared to leave the room,

"Wait a moment."

Maya stopped him.

"Hayama-san, there is something you want to ask me?"

Finally looking over at his mistress, Hayama bowed respectfully.

"Indeed there is. With your permission……"

Hayama had formerly served the previous Yotsuba Head and was now continuing his service under Maya. While he only appeared slightly past middle age, he was actually over 70 years old.

There were many things in this house he was able to say that others would shrink back in fear from.

"Is it really alright to leave Tatsuya-dono[16] like that?"

Also, unlike the others, he did not see Tatsuya as a 'fake'. His own magic ability wasn't of a particularly high level, but having seen countless magicians over the years his venerable experience rated Tatsuya highly.

—A magician one should be wary of.

"It's fine. Ah, I know full well what it is you're concerned about. Certainly, that child will betray the Yotsuba at any time."

"……My apologies."

"Just as I confirmed earlier, my magic is a bad match-up against that child's unusual talent. If it came to a serious fight, it is highly likely I would lose."

Maya's magic was 'Meteor Stream'. The Japanese name is representative of the appearance of the magic, but the English name 'Meteor Line' is more representative of the nature of the magic.

This magic which had cemented Maya's place as one of the most powerful magicians in the world, earning her the names 'Devil of the Far East' and 'Queen of Night' is a Convergence type Systematic magic which controls the distribution of light in its area of effect. Its power is especially amplified in a closed space such as rooms or tunnels.

The apparent process of this magic first forms countless tiny balls of light floating in the darkened area, which are then shot out as rays.

The attack appears like a shower of lasers, but the power of Meteor Line has no connection with the energy of the light. Even the amount of light is irrelevant.

The essence of the magic lies in forcing the redistribution of light, where the coordinates, for light to be in, are set as little balls ,and lines are then drawn between them.

Anything in the path of the space the light passes through is modified as the light is transmitted: regardless of the hardness of the object, heat resistance, plasticity, or resilience, a hole is drilled through. Not even highly transparent glass holds an optical transparency of 100%, and cannot escape the event modification that 'light has passed through' and therefore 'a hole was made'.

Looking at the logic behind this magic, rather than the phenomenon itself, it can be concluded that the magic interferes with the structural information of the object via the distribution of light, directly vaporizing solids and liquids without affecting heat or pressure; in other words a type of decomposition magic which decomposes into gas. Since it's defined as a 'ray of distributed light', it cannot be defended against via blocking, reflecting, or refracting. Since the light doesn't come from any particular direction, it cannot be shielded against by magic either. Even if one were to cover themselves with a spherical shield in all directions, it cannot alter the movement of photons and the phenomena 'light has become a line' will still be produced, resulting in a hole.

Just as it's impossible to defend against by magic which shields against physical phenomena, it's almost impossible to defend against Meteor Line with anti magic. Since it's mediated via the physical phenomenon called light, preventing it purely via anti magic such as interference over an area is extremely difficult. If one's interference strength in the single element 'distribution of light' cannot exceed Maya's, 'Meteor Line' is unstoppable. As 'distribution of light' is Maya's innate magic, interfering with it is far too high a hurdle. And once the magic has been activated, even if one tries to cause interference in the area of effect, the phenomena rewriting effect that 'light has moved' has already taken place.

Not even the Phalanx of the Juumonjis, which perfectly combines defense against physical forces with defense against magic, can hold against it. Due to that Maya stands invincible in a fight between magicians, and is regarded as one of the 'strongest magicians in the world'.

However—as 'Meteor Line' operates by indirectly affecting the structural information of an enclosed space, it decisively loses out to Tatsuya's ability to directly interfere with structural information. The magical barrier through which light passes crafted by 'Night' via interfering with the structural information is easily shattered by interference which directly affects the structural information.

"I can't even say it's unlikely I would be killed by him. But however much Tatsuya is able to betray the Yotsuba, he will never be able to betray Miyuki. And Miyuki will never oppose the Yotsuba."

"Miyuki-sama is deeply dependent upon Tatsuya-dono though. Should the time ever come that Tatsuya stands against the Yotsuba, I cannot think that she would ever oppose him."

His brow furrowed in concern, Hayama refuted the words of his mistress.

But there was no sign that Maya was disturbed.

"It's fine. Even without brainwashing, it's not particularly difficult to push someone's thoughts in a particular direction. You don't need an explanation do you, Hayama-san?"

There was pity in the smile now upon Maya's lips.

"Miyuki will never be able to escape from the responsibility she has imposed upon herself. She was raised by my sister to be like that after all. And Tatsuya will never be able to do anything which causes Miyuki pain."

"……But, in order for that."

"Yes. It's unfortunate for the other children who are candidates, but it cannot be anyone except Miyuki. So that Tatsuya, that monster, will not turn against us."

"Miyuki-sama must receive the position at any cost then."

"There's no need to fret, Hayama-san. I have everything already planned out."

Maya smiled broadly.

With a deep bow, Hayama left the room.

It's commonly thought that the Yokohama Incident of 2095 was the extension of the invasion of Okinawa in 2092, and their subsequent defeat

of three years ago (in other words, their 'failed campaign') — an attempt to redeem themselves.

However, for the events following the invasion of Yokohama to come to a close in the same way as the 'Battle of Okinawa' can only be called the irony of history.

Chapter 16

August 11th, AD 2092 / Okinawa - Battlefield

Tatsuya, accompanied by the Onna Airborne under the command of Kazama, had driven the invading enemy to the water's edge.

Normally, it'd be 'Tatsuya accompanied the Onna Airborne'.

However that single petite magician who stood alone at the head of a solitary infantry platoon, his form hidden beneath a full-faced helmet and Armored Suit as he annihilated the enemy, could only be seen as such by both friend and foe alike.

The battlefield was an utterly one-sided slaughter.

Yet at the same time, it lacked all the characteristics of a slaughter.

No blood sprayed.

No bodies flew.

The stench of burning flesh, the explosions capable of tearing men apart, were all absent.

The entire battlefield was dominated by an uncanny silence.

The bullets fired by the invaders, their grenades, portable rockets; all dissolved in the air as they flew towards the defenders. Shells, bombs, and missiles; all shared their fate.

The enemy soldiers still stubbornly resisting, still madly pulling their triggers also one by one blurred, warped; faded.

The soldiers following behind Tatsuya were no longer even firing now; they merely stared at the fantasy playing out before them.

Seeing their comrades disappear one after the other, the invading troops experienced the same disconcerting mockery of reality.

The instinctive fear which should have arisen from the sight of violent death was not stimulated, and despite being eaten away by unutterable fears, surrender did not cross their mind.

That was just what Tatsuya desired.

If the enemy had high level magicians on their side, they had not unilaterally been deployed yet. It didn't have anything to do with the Japanese side, but rather could be said to have stemmed from carelessness following the success of the invaders' initial attack.

—All of which was meaningless to Tatsuya.

Currently, his spirit was one of frenzy.

All hesitance towards death and destruction had been removed.

It was as if he no longer remembered murder as a taboo.

He killed and destroyed as easily as he walked.

Rather, he obliterated.

Even he could feel conflict from such wide reaching slaughter. But that conflict could not touch his immovable heart.

The sight of his sister on the brink of death had impacted him deeply to the core.

The moment one passed that threshold, his magic was as helpless as anything else. It was the first time he had attempted 'Regrowth' on others, but from previous experience and the knowledge that his own flesh and another's flesh were all similarly 'matter' he knew that restoration was possible.

But not even his 'Regrowth' could call someone back from death. Life and death was an irreversible cyclic process, the changing of state from 'alive' to 'dead' being purely intrinsic. 'Regrowth' could restore a body back to a perfect state, but the dead do not come back to life. Such an inherent truth was clearer to none other than Tatsuya himself.

Even if the heart had already stopped, the brain shut down, the throat torn open, if that was the extent of their injuries then revival was still possible. Even an instantly fatal wound, as long as rebuilding the body and restarting the circulation of blood would have had even the faintest chance of resuscitating the person, his 'Regrowth' could be said to give life to the dead.

But once the state of death had been established, he was helpless.

If he had not made it on time……that fear had been enough to drive even him into a panic. To Tatsuya, for whom not even his own death could induce 'true fear' — more accurately, he had been deprived of such an emotion — the fear of losing Miyuki was all the more amplified for there being no other fears to temper him and shook him strongly, deeply, and utterly. However calm he appeared, he was currently seething with rage.

In the absence of any other emotions he was simply calmly, methodically retaliating without hesitation.

In a manner of speaking, it was a rational frenzy.

A madness dominated only by one purpose.

Allowing the enemy no surrender, his madness greedily devoured the lives of all within his path.

While the routed enemy frontlines could only be said to be in a state of collapse, their chain of command was yet intact.

The enemy commander, determining that holding a bridgehead was no longer tenable, ordered a retreat out to sea.

The invasion forces fought to be first into the landing craft on the beach.

To escape the grasp of the devil even now advancing towards them step by step.

Not knowing that there also, Death awaited them with his scythe held high.

Faced with the sight of the enemy fleeing and no longer counterattacking, Tatsuya halted.

Suddenly remembering their role, the Onna Airborne assumed formation and prepared to shoot.

Yet faster than the command 'fire!' could be given, Tatsuya activated his 'power'.

It's not that there aren't magicians who would emit enough interference for it to be visible.

A truly excellent magician uses no more force than absolutely necessary to achieve the desired event modification without otherwise altering the 'world', while a magician with equal power yet inferior skill will occasionally

cause unintentional event modifications from time to time. The side effects in this instance however were purely physical.

The soldiers pushing into the small amphibious assault crafts, as well as the boats themselves disintegrated and scattered into the air. The visible distortion was caused by the boats' sudden evaporation, forming gaseous layers of different densities and refracting light.

The soldiers who had been scrambling to board the next craft stopped moving.

The patter of water could be heard as they threw their weapons into the sea.

The sound spread, as if a chain reaction.

A white flag was raised.

By raising the naval flag of the Great Asian Alliance at the same time, they were evidently banking on protective status as POWs[17].

Behind Tatsuya, instead of the order to shoot, the order to hold fire was given instead.

Seeing that, Tatsuya raised his right hand towards the white flag.

"Stop it, you fool!"

A hand appeared along with the voice.

In order to escape that hand, Tatsuya lowered his arm and twisted around.

However his right arm, which should have escaped, was firmly gripped by another hand sprouting from the left.

"The enemy does not intend to fight any further!"

He knew that perfectly well without being told.

He could not see the face of his captor due to the full face helmet, but it was a voice he had not heard before.

At the least, it wasn't Captain Kazama or Lieutenant Sanada.

In any case had Kazama attempted at any point to restrain him, Tatsuya would have had no intention of sparing the enemy regardless.

Up to if the enemy were indeed trying to surrender, exterminating the enemy before a formal surrender was established and hostilities properly ceased.

Fortunately, there were still enemies who held weapons in their hands.

"I said stop!"

But Tatsuya was unable to pull the trigger on his CAD.

His vision suddenly spun around, and he lost the target coordinates for decomposition.

He felt a strong impact on his back.

He realised that he had been thrown.

He immediately made to rise, and just as quickly realised that he was already being held down.

"Any more at this point would be mere butchery. I won't allow it."

A handgun was held to the nose of his helmet.

"Calm yourself Special Lieutenant, Yanagi, stow that gun."

Tatsuya recognised the voice this time. He also recalled the designation 'Special Lieutenant'. Should the need arise to mobilise civilians into actual combat, it was a rank given for the sake of convenience. The voice belonged to none other than Captain Kazama.

"Special Lieutenant, do you remember the conditions for your mobilisation?"

Naturally, he knew those too.

His head, previously boiling, cooled down a little.

His battle lust subsided, and with it the desire to slaughter and destroy.

"Understood."

With that reply he showed that he had unhooked his finger from the trigger of his CAD, as Yanagi removed the knee he had pressed to Tatsuya's back.

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At the surrender of the landing force and their disarmament relief began to spread not only amongst Kazama's troops but also amongst the soldiers sent to intercept them; despite being understandable, it proved to be premature.

"A message from HQ!"

A communications officer rushed over to Kazama. His face, the helmet removed, was pale.

"A detachment of the enemy fleet is approaching from Aguni! Two high speed cruisers, and four destroyers!

It's too late for interception! Their artillery is estimated to come into range in 20 minutes! We have to get away from the coast as fast as possible!"

His articulation was rather excitable, but that was understandable given the situation.

"Get me a communicator."

In contrast, Kazama gave his order in subdued tones.

"Sir!"

The soldier's voice was far louder than necessary.

The disarmed soldiers, holding their breath, looked at their captain. That none of them attempted to make a break for it was a disappointment to Tatsuya. It may have been that due to his undisguised bloodlust, none of the enemy soldiers were feeling particularly enthusiastic about taking their chances.

"This is Kazama. Could some torpedo boats.....no antiship aircraft are available either? What shall we do with the POWs then?.....Understood."

Putting down the communicator, Kazama took a deep breath.

"In 20 minutes time, this area will fall within range of enemy guns! All units take charge of the prisoners, and evacuate inland!"

Tatsuya couldn't believe his ears.

With no transports, and the number of prisoners far outnumbering their own troops, just how did he intend to make enough progress in 20 minutes?

Kazama's face, with his helmet removed, showed no sign of agitation. His determined visage was a mask of iron.

Even without ESP however, it was evident that he found the order to move the prisoners a bitter pill to swallow.

"Special Lieutenant, return to base for now."

That terse instruction, given in that emotionless voice only served to support Tatsuya's conclusion.

Or at the least, he thought so.

He had said return, but he meant escape.

"Do you know the exact positions of the enemy cruisers?"

Instead of complying with Kazama's instructions, Tatsuya inquired with his helmet still on.

"We do indeed, but.....Sanada!"

But why, Kazama didn't ask.

Rather, he called over the one carrying the tactical information terminal.

"I'm linked to our maritime radar. Shall I transfer it to our Special Lieutenant's visor?"

"Before that."

Tatsuya interrupted between Sanada's question to Kazama.

"Did you bring the armament device with the extended range sequences you showed me on that day?"

Sanada raised his visor, and exchanged a glance with Kazama.

Kazama nodded, and Sanada looked back at Tatsuya.

"I don't have it here, but if we have it lifted in by heli it can be here within five minutes"

"Please bring it as soon as possible."

At the latest, Sanada would have said, but Tatsuya cut him off with rather typically boyish haste.

Tatsuya then turned to Kazama, pulled out a wired communications line from his still fully enclosed helmet, and held it out.

Kazama merely raised his eyebrows but without a word put his own helmet back on, then connected them by plugging the wire into his terminal.

"I have a way to destroy those ships."

This secret talk he had been approached with in the presence of his subordinates began with a bombshell.

"However, I don't wish for it to be seen by the troops. Could you leave Lieutenant Sanada's device here, then move everyone out?"

Kazama could not see Tatsuya's expression.

Voices didn't carry over very well along the wired communicator either.

All he had to judge with was tone, and the slight association he had had.

".....Very well. However, Sanada and I will remain here."

".....Understood."

How will you command the withdrawing soldiers then? Tatsuya thought, but immediately put out of his mind as none of his concern.

As Kazama gave the order to pull out, giving command to the officer who had restrained Tatsuya before, Tatsuya awaited the arrival of the armament device.

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The hectic withdrawal of the interception troops was displayed at large upon the screens in the Command and Control Center.

Naturally, it was being viewed by Miyuki and co as well.

As the soldiers began to fall back with their prisoners in tow, three figures showed no signs of moving.

Murmurs ran through the command room. Who are those idiots, and such could be clearly heard even through the glass.

Seeing the video feed, Miyuki gasped.

One of the three was none other than her brother.

She knew without having to ask. Without having to check the ID signal. Even though his face was hidden behind a visor, she could tell simply from his size.

The operators were frantically repeating into their communicators requests for evacuation. An officer wearing the rank insignia of Major was desperately calling for reinforcements from a base somewhere — probably Kyushu — to come help them.

Miyuki knew that Sakurai, just by watching her clench her teeth as she stared at that scene understood what she wanted to do, what she wanted to say, and in knowing so took her hand.

She thought that was pathetic.

Even though she was just 12, she was unable to form the words she truly wanted to speak. The words 'go help my brother', words which would have come naturally to any normal selfish person.

Sakurai did not know why Tatsuya had remained in that place.

However, she could hazard a guess.

He probably had a way to deal with that fleet of approaching enemy ships.

Under normal circumstances that would be impossible, but for him, a magician who was a direct descendant of the Yotsuba and who excelled in certain areas, it was suddenly not unthinkable.

Because even though he could not use normal magic, he had shown that he was capable of insane feats such as magic capable of wholly restoring the human body — although that was not true magic according to Miya — and demonstrated it upon Sakurai herself.

It was indisputable however that as a 'magician' he was sorely lacking. If he were to simply become a combat magician as he was now, he would never be able to overcome barriers that people normally took for granted.

Not to mention the bombs and bullets he had erased earlier, whether individually or separately, had all needed to be identified first and evidently pushed him to his limits just disabling the enemy attacks. She didn't know how, and did indeed consider it an amazing skill, but if Tatsuya did have a magic capable of reaching warships dozens of kilometers away — and if he did, that would cross into the realm of Strategic class magic — in the process of casting, he would not be able to protect himself in the same way as before.

"Madam, I have a request."

The moment she thought that, without herself being aware of it, those words were already tumbling from her lips.

"What is it?"

Despite the suddenness of it all, Miya's voice contained not a hint of surprise.

Her tone suggested it was almost as if she already knew what Sakurai's 'request' was.

"I'd like to go to Tatsuya-kun."

Until a moment ago Miyuki had been glued to the screen; yet at this she forcefully wrenched her head around.

Her eyes, staring at Sakurai, were wide open.

"That is to say you wish to go, right now, over there?"

Miya's voice retained its calm tone.

Her ability was meant to entail mental interference, not mind reading.

Could it be that……Sakurai shook such convenient useless thoughts out of her head.

"Yes."

"Honami, even though you are meant to be my guardian?"

Within that was the implication, 'and yet you intend to leave me?'.

At Miya's question, Sakurai had no answer.

"……I'm–"

"Well, I suppose it's fine."

Sakurai had been about to say 'I'm sorry', an apology which could have been taken either way, yet before that Miya nodded.

"If those enemy ships are left to be, there's no telling how much longer this base will remain safe. Tatsuya intends to try do something about them, so go help him."

"Huh?"

That exclamation was reflexive.

Somehow, it seemed Miya knew what it was Tatsuya was about to attempt. Then again, it might be only natural considering she was his mother.

"Whilst it's possible in theory it's never been done in practice, yet he's thought of it anyway. His intelligence is one of his strong points after all."

However you looked at it, those were words of praise.

In spite of everything, a mother will still always be capable of boasting in her child, Sakurai thought.

"Thank you."

I'd like to believe so, she thought, as she bowed politely.

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In the previous world war which had spanned two decades, the primary armament of ships had shifted from missiles to Fleming launchers. (Initially these had been called railguns, but as their size increased their names changed.)

Modern shelling then is a continuous bombardment from these Fleming launchers. The rate of fire is overwhelmingly superior to that of gunpowder based weapons, and since there's no need to include propellant or propulsion systems they have far more destructive capacity than missiles. However, their range was no better than, or in some cases inferior to, that of traditional naval guns.

Fleming launchers emphasize rate of fire, and the recoil from extending their range whilst attempting to maintain that rate would lead to significant adverse effects on the hull which cannot be ignored.

Thus the ground attack power of a state-of-the-art modern warship is said to be over 10 times more effective than that of ships a century ago. Within the range of Fleming launchers, even a single ship can turn entire districts into a sea of flames.

The launchers are effective not only against urban areas, but also fortifications. If the two cruisers began raining fire, the average magician wouldn't stand a chance.

Tatsuya knew it was a race against time. He took the magazine out from the range expanding armament device, that large sniper rifle with the built-in specialized CAD, and quickly began ejecting the bullets.

He clasped the bullets in his hands one by one, as if praying, then reloaded them back into the magazine.

Looking on, Kazama and Sanada had no idea what he was doing. They could faintly feel that powerful magic was at work, but as to exactly what techniques were being applied, they could not begin to guess.

It wouldn't just have been them who were stumped. If any magician could see through what Tatsuya was doing at this moment, they would be truly exceptional in every sense of the word.

What Tatsuya was doing was decomposing each bullet, then recreating it anew.

By the time he had completed that procedure with each bullet, two minutes had passed.

"Time until enemy ships come within range: ten minutes."

As Tatsuya finished up the preparations on the armament device, Sanada informed him of the grace period left.

"The ships are almost 30 kilometers west off the coast……can it reach?"

"We'll just have to see."

That was the only answer Tatsuya had to Sanada's question as he set the armament device's elevation to 45 degrees.

Wind aside, that was the greatest range it would be possible to achieve.

In that position, Tatsuya activated the sequence.

From the muzzle, a pipe shaped virtual area began to radiate outwards.

This was the magic zone which would accelerate any object passing through.

Despite the short time of the area's creation, Sanada nodded with satisfaction at the size the area had expanded to.

The longer the length of the virtual area the longer the acceleration effect would be applied, and the greater the range extension. With the length it had now reached, 30 km might just be within their grasp.

But that was not the only magic Tatsuya applied.

Beyond the acceleration magic zone, yet another virtual area was taking shape.

"What in the……!?"

The acceleration magic zone was comprised of three action processes.

The reduction in inertial mass of anything entering the area.

An increase in speed.

Then the undoing of the initial process.

Just how far and how fast the first step could be achieved was dependent on the magician.

The area Tatsuya was applying now followed the same principles.

However this time the initial change in inertial mass was set to positive, the speed magnification remained the same, and the process to restore inertial mass had been disabled.

In other words the region Tatsuya added had taken the acceleration magic Sanada designed and completely rearranged it into a region for increasing inertial mass instead.

All on the fly.

"I can't believe it……"

Sanada's murmur was drowned out by the boom of the sniper rifle.

Tatsuya's eyes seemed to chase that supersonic bullet which should never have been seen.

At length he shook his head, disappointed.

"……It's no good. It could only reach 20 km."

Just how had he followed its trajectory?

While he sounded indifferent, he must have been disappointed deep down. Perhaps he was berating himself for his own weakness.

"We can only wait for them to come within 20 km."

Hearing that, Sanada paled.

"But by then, we'll be within range of enemy fire as well!"

The effective range of cruiser mounted Fleming launchers is somewhere around 15-20 km. A launcher's range is always dependent upon just how well the ship can handle the recoil, meaning range is limited by the size and shape of the ship; regardless of differences in manufacturer, range can almost always be predicted just by the class of ship.

20 km and under would definitely fall within range.

"I know. Both of you, please head back to the base. From here, I can handle things by myself."

"Don't say such foolish things! You're coming as well."

This was the place the enemy had selected as a bridgehead, in other words; it was where the conflict would be decided.

It was almost certain the enemy would launch the decisive attack here.

If one couldn't engage the enemy ships from beyond their range, once a shootout began the chances of survival here approached nil.

"If the enemy ships are not brought down, the base would be in danger."

Along with his family, still inside.

"Then at the least, move from here."

Both of them understood perfectly well what it was Tatsuya was concerned about, what it was he wanted to protect.

"No good. There's no more time to look for another vantage point."

However he rejected Sanada's proposal, for reasons known only to himself.

"Could we possibly intercept?"

Listening silently in to the conversation between the two until now, Kazama spoke up in a dejected tone.

"Impossible."

The answer was just as expected, and nothing more.

"Then, we will remain here."

What was unexpected was the reply.

To Tatsuya, Kazama's response just now was inconceivable.

"……If I fail, you would become collateral damage."

"There is no plan which is without fail, and there is no battlefield without the danger of death. While victory and defeat may be decided by tacticians, living and dying will always be decided by soldiers."

Calmly, without hubris, Kazama said so.

That famous passage, from the Hagakure[18], was all that was needed to be said.

Offshore, plumes of water erupted.

The enemy was ranging their guns.

With nothing left to say Tatsuya, Kazama, and Sanada remained silent.

The exact position of the enemy was being transmitted into Tatsuya's visor.

Wind speed, direction, and other factors which would affect shots scrolled by in strings of numbers.

Tatsuya positioned the armament device.

A stance for trajectory — prioritising distance, and leaving hits to lucky chance.

Allowing for bullet drop and flight time, the enemy was already within range.

Tatsuya triggered the virtual magic areas, and then pulled the trigger four times in succession.

Each time he moved the muzzle slightly, compensating for error due to the ever shifting wind.

In the first place, this had been a shot without much hope. However much chance favoured them, the odds would still fall upon the enemy at best. –He had done this willingly with that knowledge from the beginning.

Tatsuya followed the flight of the four bullets in his head.

To be precise his awareness, through the processing of his subconscious, chased the data of the bullets in the dimension of information.

By his own hands, using the magic he alone could wield, he had decomposed then rebuilt the bullets.

However far away they flew, he would not lose sight of their information structure.

Of the four shots he had fired, Tatsuya received the information that one of the bullets had fallen into the center of the enemy fleet.

Tatsuya tracked the exact position of that bullet with everything he had.

Kazama and Sanada, aware that Tatsuya was focusing on some large scale magic distanced themselves so as to not disturb his concentration.

All that was left for them to do was what they could with their own magic.

The enemy had already found their range.

The next salvo then, was right on target.

Firing from a lower ballistic trajectory than Tatsuya had, their fire arrived before Tatsuya's.

As a user of Ancient magic, Kazama's ability to interfere with objective structures was not high. Rather, it was low.

And Sanada, who technically wasn't even a magician but rather a magic engineer, had high objective interference yet lacked speed.

At this rate, before Tatsuya could destroy the enemy fleet, this place would be—

"I'll cover you!"

As ordinance fell like rain, a figure burst through speeding in on a motorbike.

The rider, clad in a female Armored Suit, flung away the bike as blazing Psion light erupted from her body.

Concentrating as he was on his magic a corner of Tatsuya's heart felt surprise at hearing that voice, yet gladness.

Surprise that Sakurai had left his mother.

And gladness because he knew that under her mighty shield, he could focus on his own magic without fear.

Augmented Magician, 'Sakura' series.

Their characteristic was defensive magic against powerful objective and heat based attacks.

While they could not use highly technical multi-spectrum magic such as the Juumonji's 'Phalanx', in the single field of defense against objective heat based attacks they were unrivaled in Japan.

And amongst them, Sakurai Honami showed exceedingly gifted performance.

It was because of that she was chosen to protect the one precious magician who alone was capable of mental structure interference magic, Yotsuba Miya.

The shells, aimed dead on, instead dropped into the sea.

Not a single shot was able to reach land anymore.

A magic which crippled momentum was being invoked in rapid succession several hundred meters offshore.

As he watched that spectacle with his naked eyes, his minds eye roving over the sky found the bullet in the midst of the enemy fleet.

Tatsuya stretched out his right hand towards the west, and forcibly unclenched his palm.

The bullet broke down into energy.

In that moment, the mass conversion magic 'Material Burst' was used in anger for the first time.

Beyond the horizon, a flash ignited.

The overcast sky reflected dazzling light.

Although sunset was yet far off, a shining star blazed on the Western sea.

A roar reverberated. There would be none here who mistook it for the sound of thunder.

With no staggering, all the fuel and explosives on board the ships had ignited as one.

The shelling ceased.

An eerie rumbling approached.

"Tsunami! Take cover!"

As he shouted, Kazama picked up Sakurai, who had suddenly collapsed powerless upon the ground, and began running.

Sanada, now upon the bike, swerved to line up beside him.

Tatsuya sat upon the tandem seat.

Still running and carrying Sakurai, Kazama leapt.

With theatrical acrobatics, he came to stand upon the handlebars. Rather, this went far beyond mere acrobatics.

It couldn't be said that military bikes lacked horsepower, as the clearly overloaded bike valiantly powered on.

As storms raged and waves lashed across the horizon, Tatsuya knelt at the top of a hill.

Before him lay the exhausted figure of Sakurai.

Tatsuya's face, with the helmet removed, was unmistakably filled with grief.

"……It's alright, Tatsuya-kun. This is life after all."

Helpless in the face of life which could not be saved, crushed by emotions that he should have lost; to him Sakurai extended a weak, yet serene smile.

"It's not your fault. For Augmented magicians like us, it's only natural that our life would run out sometime."

That's wrong, Tatsuya wanted to scream.

While it was true that Augmented magicians had unstable lifespans compared to the general public, her current condition was without a doubt due to the sheer stress of using large quantities of magic continuously over such a short period of time. Even for a 'Sakura' series, the strain of denying the nonstop volley of so many guns was too much to bear.

However, Sakurai would not want him to say that.

Knowing so, he could only grit his teeth.

"Truly, it's not your fault. From birth it was my role to be a shield, and it's simply that today that role ends."

But it seemed that Sakurai could tell Tatsuya's thoughts.

"That is something that I decided, not because I was ordered, but of my own free will."

Tatsuya frantically tried using 'Regrowth', but soon realised it was futile.

Even though he could rewind material matter, his power was helpless to turn back the clock of life.

"Won't you let go?"

Sakurai murmured to Tatsuya in a sweet voice.

"I, who never once had the chance to freely choose in my life, am finally free to choose how I die. I won't let this chance pass. I can finally choose to die not as a man-made tool, but as a person."

Never in his dreams had Tatsuya thought Sakurai carried such darkness in her heart.

But unexpectedly even to him, there was no surprise.

"So, won't you let me go?"

At Sakurai's words, Tatsuya could only nod silently.

With a look of peace, Sakurai closed her eyes.

Gradually, she stopped breathing.

Next to them, Sanada began to chant sutras.

Kazama placed a hand on Tatsuya's shoulder.

While carrying that hand, Tatsuya stood up.

There were no tears in his eyes.

Curiously, the feelings of sorrow had lifted from Tatsuya's heart.

Hearing Sakurai Honami's last words, he was convinced there was no need to grieve.

—Tatsuya at that time did not know that it was actually possible to convince grief away, and that it would be the one time he would do so.

Chapter 17

November 6th, AD 2095 / Yotsuba Main House - Sunroom

Possibly because there have been a lot incidents today that have reminded him of the events of three years ago.

Tatsuya thought about Sakurai Honami, who he hadn't thought about in a long time.

The memories were laced with regret.

Nevertheless, he knew he could do nothing more than regret and understand.

Besides, if she hadn't sacrificed herself, Tatsuya might not have considered polishing his magic combat skills or doing anything else with the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion.

This last time he had been able to end it without anyone else being sacrificed.

His experiences three years ago had not been in vain. Tatsuya could comfort himself with that.

And he dedicated a silent prayer deep in his heart to the woman who nobly sacrificed herself as a shield three years ago.

—That was probably what made the shock unreasonably large.

Upon sight of the face of the girl holding the tea and cakes, Tatsuya came dangerously close to raising his voice.

"…Would you like something?"

"No, thank you."

The one who was questioned by that girl was Miyuki.

Her shock was showing in a more extreme fashion than Tatsuya's.

That was not unreasonable.

The face of the girl in the servant's uniform and Sakurai Honami's were like two peas in a pod.

The girl and her fellow servant had not quite left when Maya showed herself in the sunroom.

Hayama did not accompany her.

This gathering was probably to be private.

Tatsuya was permitted to take a seat for that same reason.

"What is it Miyuki-san? You look like something gave you a shock, but..."

As she lowered herself to sit, Maya questioned Miyuki with a worried expression.

She appeared to be a different person than the one who had had a confrontation with Tatsuya; it was the normal face of Yotsuba Maya.

"No…Oba-sama, that girl just now?"

"Ah, Minami-chan?"

When she heard Miyuki's question, Maya gave a slight nod of understanding.

"Her name is Sakurai Minami. A second generation Sakura series, the girl is more than the genetic niece of the Guardian who served your mother, Sakurai Honami."

By second generation she meant a person who had a genetically modified magician as a parent.

And the phrase 'more than the genetic niece' probably meant that Honami and the girl's mother who also possesses a first generation modified body have the same DNA.

That was the reason their features were the spitting image of each other.

"The girl is already quite skilled. I think her potential abilities are on par with the Saegusa twins. I have been thinking of training her to become Miyuki-san's Guardian sometime in the future. Since once she becomes an adult there will be situations where a female guard is necessary."

Miyuki by and large understood Maya's official point.

Certainly, for Miyuki who is female to have only a male, Tatsuya, as guard causes inconvenient situations.

However, just a little while ago, Tatsuya was informed of Maya's true purpose; fortifying an additional layer of protection against some possible moment in the future of havoc and destruction. If he was being told to use a girl with the same face as 'Her' as a tool, then this could only end in conflict.

—At that moment, he had no way of predicting the havoc and destruction to come.

Chapter 18

August 17th, AD 2092 / Okinawa - Naha Airport

While listening to the announcements of plane arrivals and departures, I was recalling the events of six days ago.

After Sakurai-san went to be Onii-sama's guard, the person who manipulated the screen for us disappeared; so I could only see what happened next from the images streaming on the news.

Suddenly, at the water line a light brighter than the sun erupted.

In the middle of that light, the enemy ship vanished.

The transformed terrain of the beach was washed by breaking waves.

It was an anthem of victory.

That was the official report shared with us and the world in general afterward.

What was not shared with the world is the truth known only to us, what we were told is that the light that destroyed the enemy was made by the power of Onii-sama.

The transformation of mass into energy, the enormous energy that burned everything into nothing is the strategic class magic 'Material Burst' wielded by a strategic class magician. That indeed is the true power of Onii-sama, the name of its true form.

The one hailed as a hero for driving away the enemy is Onii-sama.

And also the sad event only we know of.

Afterward, Sakurai-san never returned.

At the joint funeral service for the victims, the cremated remains of Sakurai-san were in accordance with her will completely scattered into the ocean.

The one who returned Sakurai-san to Mother Ocean was Onii-sama.

Onii-sama never showed pain in his face.

He gently comforted me who broke down crying.

Onii-sama might not be sad. Or else it might be that he could not become sad.

No, it does not matter which one it is.

Because I have decided.

While watching Sakurai-san become ashes, I had an insight.

I, at that time, had died once.

I lost the life that Okaa-sama gave me; I received a new life from Onii-sama.

Therefore, all that I am belongs to Onii-sama.

"Miyuki, it is about time to get inside."

"Yes, Onii-sama."

When Onii-sama called out to me, I stood up off of the sofa in the lounge.

Okaa-sama no longer makes a face when I refer to him as 'Onii-sama'. The truth is that I think it probably still pains her. However, I no longer worry about Okaa-sama's feelings concerning it.

As usual, Onii-sama is handling all of our luggage and only he is in commercial class, but that no longer troubles me.

Because after all Onii-sama says that he prefers it.

Because Onii-sama's wishes are absolute.

I took the hand of Okaa-sama who is not in perfect physical condition and trailed after Onii-sama.

For now, there are still words that are not spoken. Words that cannot be spoken.

Nevertheless, I have already decided.

—Onii-sama, no matter where you go, no matter how far; I, Miyuki, am going with you—

Untouchable — The Nightmare of 2062

The eldest daughter of the Yotsuba Clan, Yotsuba Miya, gazed at the western sky from the window of her own room with her childish face clouded. She is currently twelve years old. She just became a middle school student this April, yet the anguish on her face is unsuited for her age.

She is fretting about her younger twin sister, whose whereabouts are unknown, Yotsuba Maya. Three days before, she was kidnapped by anonymous perpetrators in Taipei when she was visiting as part of a cultural exchange program sponsored by the Asian branch of the International Magic Federation. That this was not a disappearance due to unknown reasons, but rather, a violent abduction, was obvious to anyone. Because Saegusa Koichi, who was visiting Taipei with Maya, is suffering from lacerations and broken bones in his right hand and right leg and the loss of his right eye due to his battle during the kidnapping.

Koichi's condition is still worrisome. After all, Koichi is not only her younger sister's boyfriend, but also her fiancé. Rather than Koichi, who was severely injured while escaping the abductor's grasp, her worries were naturally more concentrated on Maya, who the kidnappers had made off with. To be honest, she was gripped more by feelings of anger and bitterness toward Koichi than feelings of worry. He brazenly returned alone from his cowardice while her sister was taken away.

She understood that it was not Koichi's fault. To require such a thing from a mere fourteen-year old boy was cruel and, from looking at the situation, the criminals placed more importance on Maya. It could be said that Koichi got entangled in Maya's kidnapping and was left with one eye for all eternity. Nevertheless, she was not at an age where reason could overcome emotion. Since the identity of the abductors had not been attained yet, it was all she could do to keep her anger from bursting free.

Unexpectedly, she felt a fuss in the corridor. Quicker than a knock could be made, Miya turned toward the door.

"Pardon me."

The voice of Maya's personal maid trembled with such violence as it passed through the door — it seemed like she was shrieking. These past three days, panicked voices and excited voices could be heard throughout

the mansion, but there was something a little different about this tone compared to the others — something like hope was mixed in it.

"Please enter."

As a reply, Miya opened the door in the twinkling of an eye. Even so, she did not do anything as vulgar as rushing into the crowd of servants employed by the Yotsuba family in the room. Before crossing the frame of the doorway, she vigorously shook her body. Still, impatience could not be kept off her face and her feelings of impatience returned at the same time.

"Maya-sama has been rescued!"

Upon hearing those words, Miya's mind went blank. Miya could not remember what she did after that. When she became aware of herself again, she was approaching the head of the Yotsuba Family, her father, Yotsuba Genzou.

"Otou-sama! I have been told that Maya has been found; is it true!?"

In the conference room that the family elders use for meetings, Miya interrogated her father under the intent gazes of the aunts, uncles, and other elder relatives.

"It's true. I have just received word from Juuzou."

"From Oji-sama of the Kuroba?"

As she heard that, an expression of pure relief arose on Miya's face. Kuroba is the branch family in charge of supervising the intelligence division of the Yotsuba Clan. Kuroba Juuzou, in addition to being the head of that branch family, is Genzou's brother in law. If word had come from Juuzou, then there could be no room for doubt.

Even so, Miya soon found a reason to feel indignant, and once again she confronted her father.

"Why was I not informed!"

"I don't understand what you mean. Didn't I just inform you as soon as possible?"

"Do not try to fool me please! I have been told that Maya was rescued today, which means that as of yesterday at the very latest, you probably knew the criminal's true identity! Why did you not tell me this!?"

"Because telling you would be meaningless."

"Wha...!?"

"Telling you would've been meaningless. Or do you believe that you would've been able to help save Maya?"

"I would have..."

Miya snapped her mouth shut with regret. Certainly, she was still a child; Miya understood that herself. Even if she had been told where Maya was being held, she could have done nothing. Nevertheless due to her blood ties, she felt that she should have been told the whereabouts of her younger sister, right? A whirlpool of bile swirled within Miya's heart.

"I believed not telling you was for the best."

However with her father's next words, the bile was pushed aside by a premonition of dark clouds on the horizon.

"Although I do not wish to tell you this, Miya, brace yourself."

It seemed like he had something awful to relate to her. Something terrible had happened to Maya. Miya's heart was no longer trembling from a premonition but from a conviction. An impulse to cover her ears assailed Miya's heart but, as her father told her to, she girded her nerves and prepared herself for her father's next words.

"Maya was found in Quanzhou[19]."

"Dahan's..."[20]

Dahan is a portion of the southern half of China that, after the world was beset by a firestorm of outbreaks of warfare, was quickly able to break away and establish itself as an independent nation. The Great Asian Alliance has been dominating the northern part of China continent and the Korean peninsula since two years before, and has taken possession of Tsushima[21] half a year ago. Since then Japan and Dahan, although not formal allies, had shared a common enemy in the Great Asian Alliance and had cooperated militarily.

"Maya had been imprisoned in a research laboratory placed in Quanzhou that is a subdivision of the Kunlunfang Institute[22]."

Miya's face quickly paled. Kunlunfang Institute is Dahan's magician development group. The evil rumors of that place would not die any more than the ones about The Fourth Institute which the Yotsuba are now the actual masters of, but are entirely different. The content of those rumors with regards to females is so bad that Miya could not bear to hear them fully.

"Maya is suffering from deep wounds. The damage to her body is also severe, but I am more worried about the wounds to her spirit..."

The tone of Genzou's voice, which until then had been level while he spoke, went wild. Sounds similar to teeth grinding in anger and cries of pain were mixed in his words. A rage that could not be appeased by teeth grinding, a sorrow that howling in pain would not abate.

That prompted in Miya the feeling that the worst was yet to come.

"Maya has been used as a human guinea pig for experimentation."

"How terrible!?"

"It was an experiment in magician manufacturing. It was not merely a scientific experiment. The truth is—"

"That's enough!"

No matter how prepared she had decided to be, any more than this would be unbearable for Miya. To hear any more of what happened to her younger sister would be too much.

She glared at her father with eyes full of tears. Miya widened her eyes and let tears flow from both eyes.

From both of her father's hands, blood was flowing from his own fingernails which he was digging into his own flesh.

Miya averted her face. After she did so, she saw her uncle's face. Fury swirled in her uncle's eyes. She looked at the opposite side. The people who are cousin to her father housed raging hatred in their pupils.

"Miya, there is something only you can do."

"—Yes."

Miya took numerous deep breaths to calm herself. Everyone is outraged on her younger sister's behalf. It was a minor balm, but it allowed herself to recover her sanity.

"Maya is locked inside herself. While her eyes are open, she does not respond to anyone's voice. She does nothing out of her own will, she does not even respond when we treat her wounds."

Miya firmly ground her back molars. She did so to hold back the urge to scream.

"Miya, take away everything she felt for the past three days from Maya's mind with your magic."

Miya closed her eyes and took one huge deep breath.

"If it is something that can be done, I believe it is something I too wish to do."

Miya's voice was flat with little emotion in it. By crushing her feelings, Miya was finally able to voice a reply.

"But, my magic is manipulation of the structure of self. There is no way to take away memories by changing the structure of self."

She had no power to take away memories.

"Not take away her memories. If she was aware that her memories were taken, I doubt she could maintain her sanity. What we would have in our midst would be like a ticking bomb that could go off at any time."

Genzou also understood that Miya could not wipe out memories. Still, he ordered her to do it.

"Don't take away the memories, separate the feelings from the memories. The memories of things people have done themselves naturally have emotions attached to them. Reconstruct 'the experiential memories' into 'informational memories'."

Don't take away the memory, take away the sense of reality from it.

"But Otou-sama, I cannot do such a precise operation. Although I could transmute all 'the experiential memories' Maya possesses into 'informational memories', reconstructing only those three days into

'informational memories'... manipulating 'memory' in such a way is something that is impossible for me."

Miya looked away as she answered. The rightness of what her father ordered, Miya understood with an acuity beyond that of a child. For that reason, her inability to do so with her power vexed her.

"Then change all of Maya's 'experiences' into 'information'."

"But that!?"

Miya stared at her father with disbelieving eyes. Nevertheless, Genzou did not flinch even a little from the utmost censure he received from his daughter.

"Miya, I understand your feelings. I myself am aware of the regret and guilt I will feel by taking away Maya's recollections. Even so, the way things are, Maya's spirit will definitely be destroyed."

"..."

"Tomorrow Maya will arrive at this mansion. Look at the Maya who has returned to us, Miya, and decide. No matter what your decision is, I will bear all the responsibility."

Miya bowed without a word and left her father's presence.

In the conference room Miya left, Genzou remained there surrounded by the gazes of the clan who remained.

Everyone gave Genzou a nod of approval.

"Our adversary is the central administrative institute of Dahan's magic research. Unlike the single Fourth Institute which we are the product of, it has numerous research laboratories, so the first problem is the difference in numbers."

Genzou began with their definite disadvantages. Before Asia's dissolution into North and South, the Kunlunfang Institute had been the nexus of all modern magic research on the continent. With the Kunlunfang Institute attached to Dahan, the Great Asian Alliance had lost almost all of its expertise in modern magic. For that reason, Dahan could stand toe to toe with the Great Asian Alliance despite its inferior resources. It could be said that the Kunlunfang Institute is the nucleus of Dahan's military power.

"Even so, I cannot let the savagery directed at us to pass. Although we are weapons, we are not slaves. And I refuse to be livestock. We, ourselves, are the masters of the laboratory that produced us."

As Genzou stopped speaking, all that were there again gave a nod of approval.

"This is a personal grudge. I am the parent of a daughter who has been defiled; this is my vengeance in order to cleanse my bitterness. Nevertheless, that is not all it is. I wish to show my mettle to the foolish 'Nation' who treats magicians like domesticated livestock."

"Genzou-dono."

The one who opened his mouth was the eldest of his generation of those assembled there, Genzou's uncle.

"I do not consider this matter as Maya's personal tragedy. With this incident, our entire clan of Yotsuba has been insulted right now; our honor has been sullied."

"Itoko-dono."[23]

His female cousin, who was younger than him by a decade, was the next one who wished to orate.

"I, too, have a daughter; therefore, I too do not think of this as someone else's business. My daughter is not even old enough to go to school, but when I think of my child's future, I cannot overlook this meaningless tragedy."

"We are weapons and assassins."

A voice rang out from near the lowest ranks.

"For us to make an appeal to humanity would probably be a fool's errand. No matter how selfish it is, make no mistake; those who dare to attack us can mock us from the depths of hell. But, you know that, don't you!"

The gazes from the others contained understanding and approval.

"Command us, our Master! Grant to me a part in your honored daughter's revenge!"

"Restrain yourself, Genzou-dono."

That voice exploded from next to Genzou.

"A novice like you will end up dying a dog's death. Aniue[24], first give me, your younger brother, your orders. I will show those ruffians of Asia hell."

"Genzou-dono, our feelings are the same as yours."

"Everyone who had anything to do with Maya's abduction must die."

"The magicians of Asia who acted as pawns for the rapist will be annihilated."

"Please leave our government to me. I will silence those who chant about diplomacy and military cooperation."

Genzou made a deep bow to all that had assembled in this place.

Then, he raised his head to proclaim.

"The enemy is the Kunlunfang institute and the Dahan government. We will eradicate our enemies with the full power of the Yotsuba."

◊ ◊ ◊

"... Maya... Maya."

The voice is calling me. I feel as if I haven't heard this voice in a really long time, but for some reason I did not feel as if I have been longing to hear the voice.

I open my eyes. The hospital room looked familiar, and if my memory is correct, that face belongs to my elder twin sister.

"Nee-san... this place is the treatment room in the Fourth Institute?"

At the first word from Maya's mouth, Miya relaxed and, at the same time, her face became tearful.

"That's correct, Maya. How do you feel? You don't have a headache or anything like that, do you?"

Upon being questioned by her elder sister, Maya's expression became suspicious.

"I don't have... a headache. Both my mind and my memory are clear."

As Maya spoke the words "my memory," Miya's face looked troubled.

Miya looked at Maya with fearful eyes, and Maya gazed back up at her with a face of amazement.

"Nee-san, I... have been raped."

Maya related this blandly and Miya averted her eyes.

"And my body has been messed with all over. Even the inside of my body has been disturbed. There is no place in my entire body that has not been fouled."

Miya struck her knees with both hands with a slapping sound. As if she was afraid that her body would get up off the stool and run away, and was restraining it from doing so.

"I remember all of it. Despite that, why, I wonder? It feels somewhat unreal. Like I am merely watching a movie, thinking things like horrible or pitiful even though it all happened to me."

Miya could not raise her eyes.

"Nee-san."

Maya did not take her eyes off her elder sister.

"What was done to me? Nee-san."

"...Your memory has been transmuted."

Perhaps she was finally resigned to the task, so Miya began to speak while gazing downward.

"Within the persona, there are various processes used to store memory. The memory of an individual person is not a single unit. Given that, the process for storing your own experiences and the way knowledge gained from texts and images accumulates into memory storage differ in form."

"To me, this cannot be anything but conjecture, however... if Nee-san says so."

Within the Yotsuba clan, this magic is Miya's unique gift, self structure manipulation. Miya, who was able to change the structure of self, could

sense how a self is structured. No one other than she could understand it, but it was certain that she understood it.

"I cannot peek inside the contents. What memory is stored where is something I cannot know. What is known to me is whether a stored memory is 'experience' or 'knowledge' only."

"...And so?"

At this stage, Maya had a vague idea about what her elder sister wanted to say. Nevertheless, she was going to make Miya say it.

"Maya, I do not know what you experienced. But, I knew that your spirit would remain broken if I did not use magic. Therefore I—"

"Therefore Nee-san?"

Miya hesitated to speak. Because voicing it was unendurable. Even so, Maya demanded her sister tell her what her sister had done in her own words.

"...Your 'experiences' have been changed to 'knowledge'. The memory storage of experience has been transmuted into memory storage of knowledge... the shape of your memory has been reconfigured."

"I see..."

Maya whispered only those words.

There were no words denouncing Miya.

Miya timidly raised her head and Maya faced the opposite wall.

"All that I have been until now has become simple data."

Her younger sister's words pierced Miya's core.

"My delights, my tempers, the moments of enjoyment, the moments of sorrow; all of them have become data..."

Despite what she heard, Miya could not make her escape from this place.

"Certainly, the memory of what was done to me was too much for me to bear. In that condition, my spirit was dead."

"Maya..."

"Therefore, before the memory of that rape could kill me, my elder sister killed me."

"Uh!?"

Miya grasped for air.

Maya was casting her eyes at Miya again.

"That's what happened, right? A person is formed by their experiences. There is who I was, and there is who I am now."

Miya tried to avert her eyes. Nevertheless, Maya's stare would not allow that.

"Experience being changed to mere knowledge means that my past has changed to data. All that was within me of who I was until yesterday has vanished except for the me that remains."

Maya's gaze punctured deeply into Miya's heart.

"The me I was until yesterday has been killed by my own elder sister."

Miya stood up from the stool. Turned on her heel and ran for the door as fast as she could go.

To flee from Maya's presence.

It was not something that could be apologized for.

It was also not something one would be thanked for.

They could not even share tears over it.

—The chance to restore the bond between these two people that had been severed on this day would not come for all eternity.

◊ ◊ ◊

Half a year has passed since then. Day by day, the nightmare continues for the Kunlunfang Institute and the Dahan government.

In the course of a single night, all the employees and magicians attached to a laboratory would be strangled.

A military base would suddenly break out in fighting between fellow soldiers, with the last man standing shooting himself in the head and dying.

The building the government's military liaison agency was moving into collapsed when one of their own military aircraft plunged into it. There were no survivors.

There were also administrative facilities for research where everyone in the building suffocated due to lack of oxygen. There was also awareness of incidents where everyone was stabbed to death. Politicians who were aware of the outbreak of the incidents traveled incognito for a secret assembly; that day, a rare congregation of Dahan's leadership took place.

There was absolutely no clue to who the culprits were. Among the incidents, there certainly existed cases wherein the culprit had been killed, but no corpses remained. Traces of the culprits vanished without exception.

Without a doubt, it was a nightmare.

Exactly half a year from the first mysterious event, the nightmare revealed its form at last.

All the subdivisions and branch offices were quashed; all that remained was the main headquarters of the Kunlunfang Institute. The fortifications solidified by Dahan's magicians were invaded by three magicians.

A mere three people. Against the three hundred stationed at the Kunlunfang Institute. Formerly, Dahan's magic regiment had boasted a breadth of three thousand; death and desertion had reduced it until it was a mere tenth of what it was.

"My name is Yotsuba Genzou."

The magicians guarding the main entrance were slain in the twinkling of an eye by the man in the prime of his life who introduced himself in Japanese.

The researchers and magicians assembled at the main branch, as well as the authorities finding shelter there, watched Genzou enter their view on the screen as one.

"In order to cleanse ourselves from our hatred of you, all of you will die. This is revenge for the future you took from my daughter."

While Genzou spoke, he slashed a knife toward the camera.

The five thousand people who saw the image simultaneously patted their necks as a vision of their own heads being lopped off assaulted them, then sighed in relief as they found their heads still attached. When they timidly returned their gazes to the screen, there was no one there.

The research focus of the Fourth Institute that birthed the Yotsuba clan was "the endowment and improvement of magical abilities given by the mind's structure for the usage of mind manipulation magic." In order to fulfill this purpose, The Fourth Institute first gathered people whose lineage predisposed them to have mind manipulation power.

Among these people, some individuals were transformed into genuine super powered beings, while others remained no more than mere illusionist tricksters who could do no more than create heat haze like mirages. The magicians with strong mind manipulation abilities were picked out, strengthened, and had the primary field of their magic calculation area directly modified. That was the Fourth Institute's accepted procedure for magician development.

The "Yotsuba" produced as a result inevitably descended from two types of magician lineages. One were those born with a mind manipulation ability that was strengthened. The other were those whose magic calculation areas were warped by a strong power. These two heritages stood side by side and mixed to form the "Yotsuba". Even those who shared the same blood displayed the two traits randomly. For example, Miya inherited the traits of the former, and 'Mind Structure Manipulation' is a form of mind manipulation magic that only she can use; Maya represented the latter, as she did not have any form of mind manipulation magic, but instead acquired a distinctive power from birth.

The three who have now infiltrated the Kunlunfang Institute each use a strong unique mind manipulation magic.

One was a user of human cognizance fixation magic. His magic used the five senses as a medium in order to get someone to "fixate on something," which is what could be called planting a fixed idea. The time period this continued was 9 minutes. For example, he would do so to a witness who spotted a concealed person in a certain place. It did not matter if it was

with the naked eye or through a camera; it did not matter if it was one person or a thousand. The information from the vision, "I see him," allowed him to transmit his magic through any medium for nine minutes so no one doubted that "he has not moved from the shadow of that place." Even though he leisurely left the shadow and crossed their line of sight, those trapped by his magic were caught up in the idea that he was hiding.

Even if a loud alarm rang, they would not connect that sound to him.

The other one was a user of magic that controlled a person's will. The longest this could continue was one minute; the number of targeted individuals was seven people at the most, and the effect range was twelve meters. That he could not command the self infliction of wounds to those whose mind manipulation power exceeded his own was another limitation, but however temporary it was, when they fell under his technique, his victims inevitably could not resist his commands. In order to send commands, psion waves transmitted the general idea. It could overcome thick walls to work, and the barrier of language was also no problem. He took control from 10 seconds to 1 minute. Since the victims would reliably execute only a single command and there had been 2 examples recorded outside of Japan, the name of "One Command" had been stuck on this magic.

The pairing of these two's magic easily resulted in their infiltration into the facility turned fortress. They purposely let themselves be caught by surveillance cameras and soon let an image of them fleeing be displayed. By doing so, the three infiltrators were giving the impression that aside from Genzou, the infiltrators had left the facility and were outside. And "One Command" was used on the guards who passed through the front door to order them to throw open the doors. Of course, once the guards opened the doors, they were finished. Suggestion was repeatedly used for disposal. The two of them had a time limit of 9 minutes to reach their target location, the guard control room, a limit which was a struggle for the pair to make.

Next, the pair commenced their work. Due to their possession of powerful mental manipulation magic abilities, they did not possess more than the ordinary physical phenomenon manipulating magic from their four genetic lineages. While advancing upon the magicians defending the laboratory for nine minutes wore down their magic, it was certain that whether their enemies were many or few, mere words would not deceive them.

They directly wrote into the brains — to be accurate, they transmitted electrical signals to the brain which gave the mind data directly — using a manual to completely turn off the facility's security system.

That was, without a doubt, close timing. There was only ten seconds remaining until the pair's operational deadline. A group of over ten Dahan Magicians, all with gleaming metal bands on their heads, came to attack them. For a few minutes, there was a fierce fight and magical attack exchange — then the control room became unusable due to the extreme heat and the blast from the explosion.

Genzou became aware of his allies' self-destruction from the fact that the security system was down, which he knew due to crossing two places where the barriers had been released. In order to leave no evidence nor genetic samples, their flesh had been engraved beforehand with conditionally activated magic that self-immolated their bodies. The activation of the cast magic was perceived by Genzou's magic sense.

(...Sorry.)

Within his heart, Genzou apologized with one brief word. This battle, as he himself proclaimed, started with his own personal grudge. Nevertheless, his clan members accompanied him on his vengeance out of their own free will. Therefore apologizing for their sacrifice might be mocking their determination. —Even though he understood that, Genzou could not stop apologizing to his allies, who went to their deaths.

With this, the number of casualties to the Yotsuba clan from the feud they had started was twenty-nine. This was about half the number of Yotsuba who practice combat magic.

In contrast, the number of enemy magicians who had died added up to roughly three thousand five hundred. Each one that they had lost was balanced by about 120 times in enemies they had slaughtered, Yotsuba magicians did not go down easily. Genzou was determined that he would keep the balance sheets as they were.

Unlike his thoughts, his body did not stop. The director of the Kunlunfang Institute. He was today's target. Genzou was running down the corridor with the silenced alarm system to the inner sanctum. And anyone standing in Genzou's way, magician or not, would lose their life to the blade he flourished. Although he should not be aware of it, Genzou felt his magic calculation area overheat as he gradually approached his limits. If this

continued, he was probably going to burn out his mind. Even so, there was no way he was going to stop now.

Facing the last door, Genzou did not stop his feet; without pausing, he accelerated.

The inside of the room was swollen with signs of magic.

There were probably four people whose magic rivaled his own. The director of the institute and his fellows. As Genzou faced his true desired foes, the magic of those who guarded them prepared to attack him.

Nevertheless, their magic was never completed.

Genzou's magic was faster.

The abilities of the four magician's and Genzou's were nearly equal. Regardless of that fact, Genzou was one to two steps ahead since his magic was already active.

Genzou kept his knife level and waved it like a flag. As anticipated, the response mowed down that side in a flash. In front of the waving blade, four enemy magicians fell, their necks spouting blood.

Genzou's magic was "Grim Reaper". It was the type of mind manipulation magic that implanted a specific image in the victim's mind. That image was "death". To the victim who had been given a premonition of death, the display of a symbol of that image was strong suggestive magic. It did not matter if the first image was only an arbitrary one. Direct or indirect contact made no difference, time and distance were also not barriers. As long as the victim was able to recall that image, a suggestion could be amplified a thousandfold to affect even the flesh.

Aside from ridding one's own memory of the image, any kind of protection was meaningless. Adversaries who met Genzou killed themselves off in the second encounter. In order for this magic "Grim Reaper" to activate, a direct meeting with the victim was necessary. For the magic to be completed, Genzou had to be aware of his foe and his foe had to be aware of him. Being plunged into your own personal valley of death was the first effect of this magic.

While regretting that the presence of the four magicians meeting their doom could not be prolonged, Genzou leveled the knife to strike them down. The director of the Kunlunfang Institute, the Dahan government's

chief of military affairs, and the other Dahan dignitaries who quivered in this place simultaneously crumpled down, vomiting blood from the neck.

(This is way too quick)

Looking down on the horde of dead bodies before his eyes, Genzou soliloquized deep in his core. For this past half year, he had steadily cornered them to this end; Genzou was confident in the amount of terror he had generated in them. Nonetheless, the way the ultimate target had been brought down left him with the feeling that it might have better if it had been an even more painful way to die.

Unexpectedly.

As dizziness overcame him, Genzou went down on his knees.

He hurt like his head was split open,

(Wrong...)

In the midst of intense pain, Genzou deduced that the pain did not come from his body, but was rather sent to his body from his mind. The repeated use of "Grim Reaper" had exceeded the limits of his mind's ability to use magic.

(I will never return to Japan.)

It was unsubstantiated. The limits of an individual's magic calculation area could not yet be objectively measured by individuals. Nevertheless, Genzou was convinced of it. He who could manipulate the death visions of others felt death closer to him than ever before in his life.

Genzou sent strength into his trembling knees and stood up. In this facility, over one hundred people, the main body of all the employees and magicians who worked there remained.

(Looks like I shall be able to collect my fare to cross the Sanzu[25].)

Genzou bared his teeth in a grin and laughed.

(Miya, Maya, forgive me.)

As Genzou sought his next prey, he apologized in his heart to his beloved daughters whom he would never see again.

Thus, the Yotsuba's revenge ended. In the aftermath, only tragedy lingered.

Yotsuba Maya lost her ability to procreate due to the injuries she received at this time. Regeneration treatment had progressed to the point of manufacturing limbs and transplanting them, but reviving her natural female abilities was beyond them.

Due to her inability to have a child, the Yotsuba clan and the Saegusa clan dissolved Maya and Koichi's engagement. Saegusa Koichi had forever lost his right eye and his beloved simultaneously. As for Koichi, cloning and transplanting techniques had advanced enough to restore his eye. Nevertheless, Koichi rejected that possibility, for he could not live on alone unmarked as if nothing had happened.

In the aftermath of this incident, Miya broke her body from overusing her mind manipulation magic before she turned twenty like a penance. She was repeatedly in and out of the hospital and lived her life under medical care for ten years.

In response to Maya's tragedy, the Yotsuba enacted a policy of attaching guards to clan members who possessed an especially superior disposition for magic. The post was not assumed by temporary guards who worked for money; these guards risked their lives to fulfill their duty throughout the lifetime of the one they protected — thus the Guardians were created.

In regards to the secret feud between the Yotsuba and Dahan; on the Yotsuba side, there were thirty dead. From this war, the Yotsuba lost the head of the family and half of its fighting strength.

On the other side, Dahan's dead were approximately four thousand. For the sacrifice of a mere thirty people, the Yotsuba clan assassinated four thousand: cabinet ministers, high class bureaucrats, officers, magicians and researchers; as for the continent of Asia, it had all its research results on modern magic annihilated.

Due to this damage, Dahan suffered an internal collapse after one year and the Great Asian Alliance unified the continent of Asia.

As for East Asia, the antagonism between the North and the South came to a resolution; as for the northern hemisphere, a resolution for the world wide border conflicts was jury-rigged.

It was the end of World War III.

And among those who knew the truth about the collapse of Dahan, the Yotsuba were feared as "Untouchable".

References

1. ↑ This means elder brother. Normally, a younger sibling would use an honorific with it. I am using the word because using my elder brother would indicate intimacy between Miyuki and Tatsuya that she doesn't feel.
2. ↑ Father. I am using the Japanese word because normally someone like Miyuki would use Otou-sama.
3. ↑ A female Japanese snow monster
4. ↑ descriptions given later indicate that this guy and his friends are in their late teens or early twenties
5. ↑ A deep bow with the forehead on the ground given to beg forgiveness
6. ↑ Large Japanese drum
7. ↑ A polite way of saying uncle
8. ↑ Father without any honorifics.
9. ↑ No real English equivalent; the idea of hitting your opponent in the stomach and having the impact transfer all the way to the back.
10. ↑ Lieutenant is not an air force rank.
11. ↑ 'Four' and 'death' have the same pronounciation in Japanese.
12. ↑ 'Striking at a distance' by projecting your ki, without physical contact. Kinda like a Hadouken.
13. ↑ Two-factor Theory of Emotion
14. ↑ Туман-бомба: Mist Bomb
15. ↑ 伯母上: archaic formal term of address for Aunt, made by combining the japanese word for aunt (Oba) with the honorific Ue. Still used nowadays in the upper echelons of Japanese society, albeit extremely rarely. It carries immense respect, which can be further increased by the addition of '-sama'. See Japanese honorifics: Ue for more details.
16. ↑ An honorific that lies between '-san' and '-sama'. When attached to a name it roughly equates to 'lord' or 'master'. See Japanese Honorifics: Dono for more details.
17. ↑ Prisoner of war

18. ↑ By Yamamoto Tsunetomo, on the way of the samurai. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hagakure
19. ↑ A city in China. See Quanzhou for more details.
20. ↑ Literally Great Han's or Great China's
21. ↑ An island between Korea and Japan. See Tsushima Island for more details.
22. ↑ The Kunlun Mountains have both a mythical and physical existence. The institute either has a physical location in the mountains or has named itself the equivalent of the Mount Olympus Institute
23. ↑ This is the Japanese term used address a cousin in respectful manner.
24. ↑ This Japanese term is an archaic and highly respectful form of addressing an elder brother, used by both younger siblings and their spouses.
25. ↑ a river in Japanese mythology that the dead cross over; coins are buried with the deceased to pay for the crossing.

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